

NGDLI and strategic governance: An action framework for boards and senior higher education leaders

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About the NGDLI Project

This research brief is part of the Next-Gen Digital Learning Infrastructure (NGDLI) project, undertaken by the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) with the support of the TIAA Institute.

The quotes highlighted in this report are from interviews with education experts regarding the future of the postsecondary learning enterprise.

The project's overall purpose is to build understanding of the digital future of the postsecondary learning enterprise and to strengthen strategic governance by institutional executives, governing boards and policy leaders.

Project goals

Specific goals of the NGDLI project include:

- Create a shared language and frameworks for understanding of NGDLI for higher education institutions (HEIs)
- Leverage recent events (including the global pandemic) to elevate the topic among senior HEI leaders nationally and motivate strategic action
- Gather expert perspectives on best-in-class examples, emerging technologies, and key trends and opportunities—to inspire experimentation and innovation by HEIs
- Strengthen strategic HEI governance and the proactive pursuit of improved digital learning infrastructure
- Facilitate HEI collaborations and strategic alliances to support equitable and efficient development of NGDLI

About The New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)

Founded in 1955 by six visionary New England governors, NEBHE brings together leaders of education, higher education, government, business and labor to forge partnerships and advance ideas that enhance the economy and quality of life in the six-state region and around the world. NEBHE works to broaden education opportunities and advance collaboration among the region's colleges and universities to expand access, success, affordability, equity and the impact of higher education.

About the TIAA Institute

Since 1998, the TIAA Institute has helped advance the ways individuals and institutions plan for financial security and organizational effectiveness. The Institute conducts in-depth research, provides access to a network of thought leaders, and enables those it serves to anticipate trends, plan future strategies and maximize opportunities for success. To learn more, visit www.tiaainstitute.org and follow us on Twitter @TIAAInstitute.

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Executive summary

This research brief seeks to catalyze HEI presidents, boards and board leaders to take advantage of post-pandemic opportunities to re-envision the future of their postsecondary learning enterprises. Additionally, it seeks to challenge leaders to rethink approaches to college and university governance, elevating the importance of strategic governance to harness the agility and innovative capacities of their institutions.

Key takeaways

Drawing upon primary findings and expert perspectives from the Next-Gen Digital Learning Infrastructure (NGDLI) project, the brief argues for new approaches to effective leadership and governance in today's postsecondary education environment. Specifically:

- Leaders and institutions must utilize the present window of opportunities to **re-envision the future of postsecondary learning enterprises**, particularly given multiple forces accelerated by the pandemic, including: digital transformation, hybrid work and learning, growth of educational technologies and the expansion of non-degree credentials and non-institutional providers.
- Leaders must ask: **How can lessons from pandemic-driven change be further utilized to benefit students and institutions?** Actions must be driven by a commitment to keeping students' needs first, building resilience in anticipation of future disruptions and a compelling institutional vision for the future of learning.
- Boards and senior HEI leaders must **adopt an expanded orientation toward strategic governance**, focusing on the "future readiness" of the institution. Board leaders and members must act as partners to engage senior HEI leaders and other stakeholders in making sense of changing competitive landscapes, assessing strengths and weaknesses and developing and executing agile strategies focused on long-term competitiveness and the changing needs of learners.
- Board leaders and presidents must **catalyze strategic conversations to frame future-oriented issues** and engage key leaders and stakeholders to consider: models of hybrid or flexible learning; ongoing digital transformation and learning infrastructure investments; increasing capacity for innovative learning design and faculty development; increasing R&D capacity for experimenting with new technologies, pedagogy and delivery; and becoming affordable learning organizations to address recurring learning needs across the career and life continuum.
- Critical **strategic governance practices** must include increasing board and committee bandwidth for consideration of strategy development, identifying new members and skills needed to maximize the board's strategic effectiveness, recruiting "independent directors" or trustees to expand the expertise and objectivity of boards and increasing board development to better educate trustees and hone their strategic focus.
- To support the adequacy of boards' skills and strategic orientation, national organizations should collaborate to create **robust trustee training and certification programs requiring regular professional development**. Accreditors and state policymakers should work to increase expectations and requirements related to trustee training and certification.

Introduction

The Next-Gen Digital Learning Infrastructure (NGDLI) project was launched in 2021 to better understand the forces and factors that are defining the future of the postsecondary learning enterprise—and the digital and other infrastructures needed to achieve it. Multiple insights emerged from NGDLI's nationwide survey of college and university presidents, interviews with numerous higher education experts and analysis of key trends and forces. These include:

- The future of postsecondary learning will be increasingly digital and hybrid, combining in-person and online elements and creating greater flexibility related to place and time. Fully 82% of presidents, for example, indicate their institutions intend to increase hybrid (both online and on-campus) learning opportunities and other support services as a result of the pandemic.¹ HEIs will need to develop and refine their visions for learning and determine what flexible models will effectuate them.
- The pandemic accelerated digital transformation throughout the economy, expanding organizations' ecommerce capabilities, improving customers' experiences and reshaping their expectations. In our survey, presidents ranked improving digital infrastructure as their highest priority for physical capital investment. HEIs must evaluate the status of their digital transformations—redesigning student support and learner experiences to deploy optimal combinations of people and technology.
- The pandemic catalyzed further growth in education technology investments and innovations, expanding the market for technologies and services designed to improve academic and administrative functions and the learner experience. HEIs will need to expand their internal R&D (research and development) capacity to experiment with innovative learning tools—and increase investments in learning design and faculty support.
- Non-degree, certificate and microcredential programs, as well as non-institutional providers, will continue to grow in response to many learners' expanding preference for alternatives to traditional degree programs. HEIs must determine how to compete—and/or partner—with alternative providers and rethink the credentials they offer.
- Ongoing technological and economic change means that individuals will need more frequent, more accessible and more affordable high-quality learning engagements across a longer span of their adult and working lives—well beyond the 18- to 22-year-old period of traditional college going. HEIs will need to transform into continuous learning organizations and rethink credentials, cost, pricing, delivery models and the alumni relationship.
- While 74% of presidents surveyed indicated that support from their governing boards was important, just over half (53%) think they have adequate board expertise to drive the needed institutional and digital transformations.² To bring innovation to the future of their postsecondary learning enterprises, HEI leaders will need to cultivate more expert, proactive and strategic board members who will help elevate the innovation imperative and effectively engage campus stakeholders.

“A critical question for governing boards is how the institution is thinking about multimodal learning that gives students options in terms of how, when and where they learn. We need to make space for models that are less anchored in time and space. The pandemic created an opportunity for greater fluidity in learning models, with greater access and hybrid formats.”

Paul LeBlanc,
Southern New
Hampshire
University

Informed by these key lessons, this research brief has two core goals: The first is to catalyze presidents, boards and board leaders to take advantage of the unique post-pandemic opportunities to proactively re-envision the future of their postsecondary learning enterprises. The second is to challenge these leaders to rethink their approaches to college and university governance, elevating the importance of strategic governance to further harness the attention, agility and innovative capacities of their institutions.

To those ends, this brief focuses on several key areas:

“COVID created the biggest unplanned, large-scale education experiment in history. The question is how we will continue to reimagine the higher education enterprise, but at an accelerated pace. Institutions that did not use the COVID period to prepare for what the future could look like are likely to be in trouble.”

Jamie Merisotis,
Lumina Foundation

Window of opportunities. First, it argues that HEIs and their leaders have a distinct window of opportunities before them to re-envision the future of postsecondary learning enterprises. This window results from the confluence of multiple forces, fueled by the pandemic experience and the dynamic action and learning that it elicited from HEIs.

The focus on “opportunities” reflects the belief that within the diversity of American postsecondary institutions, there are many potential paths to realize new visions for effective postsecondary learning. These will differ based on numerous factors, including current capacity, resource adequacy, institutional history, populations served, mission and the strength of executive and board leadership.

Closing strategic governance gaps. Second, the brief notes the urgent importance of significantly expanding strategic governance by boards and senior leaders of HEIs. While common to mainstream theories of effective governance, strategic governance is uncommon and inconsistent in actual practice in postsecondary education—to the disadvantage of some institutions. The brief describes the concept, its underlying principles and its relevance to today’s window of opportunities. It asserts that strategic governance will be a critical ingredient in the extent to which HEIs successfully leverage “pandemic agility” to transform their learning enterprises.

Strategic governance in practice. Third, the brief seeks to answer the question of, “What does strategic governance look like in practice?” It suggests how boards, board leaders and senior HEI leaders might operationalize the concept to alter the common activities that trustees and other stakeholders engage in. Change in postsecondary learning enterprises and their outcomes will require greater reliance on strategic governance practices.

Expert views on the future postsecondary learning enterprise. Fourth, the brief shares several takeaways from our interviews with experienced leaders and expert observers of higher education. While their backgrounds and perspectives vary widely, there were multiple areas of convergence that serve to underline the importance of leveraging the window of opportunities, improving strategic governance and actively responding to changes that will impact the relevance and effectiveness of HEIs. Their observations provide a considerable number of “conversation starters” to get HEI leaders and trustees oriented toward the future of postsecondary learning.

Key questions and recommendations for strategic governance. Lastly, the brief suggests questions that HEI boards might use in strategic governance to catalyze consideration of the postsecondary learning enterprise. It answers specific questions about strategic governance and its application to varied types of HEIs. It also provides specific recommendations about the future of trusteeship given the strategic governance imperative.

Window of opportunities

After many challenging and uncertain months, HEIs stand at an important confluence of multiple events and forces, including: the impact of a global pandemic, continued economic uncertainties, ongoing technological change and further questions about the value of traditional investments in postsecondary education. Once again, they face change, uncertainty and opportunity.

I have argued that the pandemic represented a “Digital Dunkirk Moment” for postsecondary institutions, in which faculty and administrators nationwide marshalled a heroic response to an incredibly difficult situation.³ Their incalculable efforts succeeded in transitioning millions of students to primarily digital means of learning and demonstrated their tremendous dedication to students and higher education. They have not received the recognition they deserve for such dedicated work. With a “change management” perspective in mind, HEI leaders must purposefully celebrate the impressive “wins” achieved by institutions’ pandemic response.⁴

The pandemic forced HEIs to quickly rethink the delivery of nearly all aspects of learning, teaching and support services. While HEIs rapidly managed such digital *transitions* to resume instruction and other services through the depths of the pandemic, the extent to which changes resulted in digital and other *transformations* should be carefully assessed.

As HEIs renew, reflect and regroup, they have a unique opportunity to reflect on timely questions such as: Will these events and experiences result in a “big reset” for HEIs and for the higher education industry? As the pandemic dissipates, will HEIs choose to settle back toward their pre-pandemic state of affairs? What temporary and permanent changes have occurred in institutions’ learning enterprises and in the role of digital learning? How can lessons from pandemic-driven change be further utilized to benefit students and institutions?

Our survey research indicates that the pandemic increased awareness among HEI presidents of the need to more proactively anticipate future changes and improve digital learning infrastructure.⁵ To what extent, however, is that awareness shared by HEIs’ academic and administrative leaders and other stakeholders?

In sum, leaders must not miss the opportunities to leverage all the experiences, learnings, flexibility, innovation and engagement that was produced by the pandemic to achieve further institutional transformation. Such hard-won outcomes must not go unutilized!

Leaders are talking a lot about what it looks like to return to normal after the pandemic. But we cannot go back to normal because it was inadequate. Much of higher education as we know it was designed for educating elite white males. If we believe that the mission of higher education is to educate our citizenry, what can we build now to make that possible?”

Flower Darby,
University of
Missouri

Why else must HEIs renew energies and refocus efforts to capitalize on recent experience and the current window of opportunities? There are several reasons:

Keeping students first

HEIs are positioned to build upon their notable pandemic efforts that focused on supporting students and putting them first. Specifically, leaders can highlight how those actions demonstrated a shared commitment to student success and well-being and provide the core premise for accelerating efforts to transform the student experience and increase success.

Our survey of presidents found, for example, that the primary goals inspiring further transformation of HEI digital infrastructure were improvements to the student learning experience (indicated by 99% of respondents), improved student retention (91%), increasing flexible and hybrid learning (91%) and improving non-academic support (85%).⁶ There is no better reason for continued transformation than the student learning experience, particularly given the number of learners—current, past and prospective—who altered postsecondary plans due to pandemic-related factors. They must be re-engaged and supported to success.

Readiness and resilience

The pandemic was an extended “prologue” and practice run for the future. We live in an era of increasing volatility and disruption by external and macro-level forces. Institutional transformation and digital resiliency are critical given the likelihood of recurring challenges. For example, though states and countries are transitioning public health measures from a pandemic to an endemic response, further COVID disruptions will occur over time. Experts expect other viruses to present similar threats.

Additionally, across the globe, ongoing climate change is increasing the probability, frequency and intensity of extreme weather, climate-related events and natural disasters. HEIs everywhere will face higher risks that such disruptions will affect them and those they serve. We must resolve that our HEIs will be ready and resilient, able to provide learning continuity—and quality—for students and communities. This will require further digital transformation.

Visions for the future of learning

HEI leaders must make proactive and sustained innovation *the* new normal. We must actively continue to support the responsiveness, agility, innovation and collaboration that faculty and staff brought to bear during the pandemic. Developing compelling visions for the future of learning, defining innovation priority areas, identifying specific problem targets, providing adequate incentives and resources and rewarding successes will help to solidify culture and capacity.

Institutional change takes time, but the pace of change in technology, society and the economy continue to move at significantly faster rates than our HEIs. We can leverage recent experience to quicken our pace and to inspire proactive, voluntary change that is driven by a vision for the future of learning and the success of students.

Closing strategic governance gaps

Strategic governance is an essential contribution of effective boards of trustees to the institutions they oversee. It is crucial to envisioning next-generation postsecondary learning enterprises and infrastructures—and for overall institutional sustainability.

Defining strategic governance

The concept of strategic governance is not new and is rooted in the basic roles and fiduciary responsibilities of trustees: to act with good judgment in the best interests of the institution and those it serves.⁷

Similarly, strategic governance complements both the principles of shared governance (inclusive processes by which faculty, staff and other stakeholders participate in developing policies and decisions) and important distinctions between governance and management (in which the board oversees and advises, but delegates management and operations to HEI executives).⁸

Strategic governance is different from strategic planning, a widespread HEI practice in which institutional stakeholders (occasionally involving trustee representatives) periodically collaborate to develop formal, well-documented, multiphase plans describing future institutional activities, priorities and outcomes. While such plans can serve important purposes and impacts, views of their effectiveness vary widely.⁹

In contrast, strategic governance is focused on the “future readiness” of the institution. It emphasizes varied ways that board leaders and members act as helpful partners by proactively engaging and supporting senior HEI leaders and other stakeholders to:¹⁰

- Make sense of the HEI’s changing competitive landscape
- Assess the HEI’s competitive strengths and weaknesses
- Understand the forces and factors impacting the HEI’s environment, industry and stakeholders (including students and employers)
- Respond to accelerating technological, economic, political, demographic and other changes; new competitors (institutional and non-institutional); and other disruptors of the status quo
- Develop and execute agile, iterative strategies with a focus on long-term competitiveness, sustainability and the changing needs of learners
- Expand the HEI’s capacity for experimentation and innovation

In sum, board-driven strategic governance works to ensure that HEI leaders and stakeholders better understand, prepare for and agilely respond to environments of increasing complexity and change. While respecting the expertise and specialized roles of other HEI stakeholders, the board serves as a positive catalyst for adapting to change and keeps stakeholders engaged and accountable for innovation.

Strategic governance gaps

Of course, all of that is much easier said, than done—and HEIs experience consequential strategic governance gaps that can occur under several scenarios.

The first and highly common gap occurs when boards and presidents inadequately translate the notion of strategic governance into practice. In such scenarios, they mutually recognize the need for change and begin to redirect board focus to considering strategic issues. Their intentions are good, but they do not substantially alter the utilization of board time, expertise and influence to address strategic issues. Thus, the scope and rate of transformation do not keep pace with the changing postsecondary education landscape. As a result, the HEI is undistinguished from its peer institutions, and opportunities are missed.

A second larger gap exists when inadequate board oversight permits inadequate leadership and management by senior executives to result in inadequate responses to critical risks or challenges. Consequently, the HEI encounters enrollment, financial and other declines that imperil fiscal sustainability and lead to increased borrowing or the violation of existing debt covenants. These circumstances then result in probation or loss of accreditation or authorization, revocation of Title IV financial aid program participation and, finally, institutional merger or closure.

The higher education and other press regularly report on such scenarios and examples are not difficult to find. Often, decline is evident over time, but board and management actions were not timely or adequate, reducing available alternatives and resulting in closure or change of ownership. In many instances, the board failed to proactively close the gap between institutional needs and the actions necessary to address strategic and operational challenges. This situation is more difficult, in some instances, because of gaps in the board's knowledge about the HEI's deteriorating circumstances.

Lastly, a third gap exists when change initiatives (sometimes precipitated by financial or other challenges) ignite internal or external resistance, revealing divisions between the board, senior HEI leadership, faculty and other stakeholders—including students, alumni and political and community leaders. Such resistance can derail change and innovation, sometimes due to disparate interests, inadequate inclusion, ineffective change management, past history or other issues. As a result, trust is lost, cooperation ends and change initiatives are impaired. Leaders may then face the prospect of needing to act without adequate regard of stakeholders due to exigency.

While resistance to change can always be expected, this gap occurs when the board and senior leadership fail to establish a culture of innovation, engage stakeholders in strategic considerations and align interests and expectations to the need for proactive change.

Strategic governance in practice

How can the notion of strategic governance alter an HEI board's way of thinking and activities? What might be different in governance and in HEI outcomes as a result?

To be clear, strategic governance is not an argument for board intrusion into roles and prerogatives of senior leaders, faculty or other stakeholders. The adage that a board should keep its “nose in, but its fingers out”¹¹ applies here too. Rather, strategic governance calls for heightened attention to a board's fundamental fiduciary responsibility to ensure the long-term relevance and viability of the institution, principally by acting as a partner in charting the HEI's future course and adaptive and innovative responses to pervasive changes.

In addition to vital functions and essential fiduciary roles—from hiring and evaluating the president to approving budgets, policies and proposals—the board needs to elevate the innovation imperative for the HEI. It must challenge leaders and stakeholders, notwithstanding the constant pull of immediate issues, to galvanize a vision for the future of the learning enterprise and new models for achieving it.

Here are five additional dimensions in which board leaders and members, in close collaboration with presidents, can promote a more strategic focus in their governance roles:

Strategy development

In fulfilling their basic functions, boards often place a majority of attention on current- or next-year activities, with a short-term and primarily internal focus—and with less engagement of themselves and other stakeholders in considering the external environment and competitive landscape or the longer term.

Boards must work to increase their focus on and support for strategy development and competitive positioning. This tactic should consider external factors and forces that are transforming the industry and ways to foster agility in light of accelerating change and disruption of traditional approaches.

Change orientation

With boards commonly composed of alumni and others connected to the HEI, trustees often have an affinity for the past, tradition and the status quo. Proposed changes are often incremental and reactive to crises or other needs.

Boards must work with leaders to foster a more proactive, change-, innovation- and opportunity-oriented culture at the HEI. They must support leaders in interpreting dynamic forces in the institution's environment and providing support and incentives to catalyze agility and transformation.

Trustee engagement and time

Presidents and HEI leaders often cultivate an “arm's length” relationship with the board and limit engagement accordingly. Thus, the board's work primarily consists of transacting basic business-agenda items and receiving reports from HEI staff—many of which emphasize (possibly over-emphasize) the positive aspects of the institution to cultivate board contributions to fundraising. Discussion and conversation are limited, defined by traditional agendas, standard committee structures, passive engagement and, in general, vague roles for trustees.

To best tap board expertise and support, board leaders and presidents must expand and improve board engagement and deeply educate board members regarding the HEI's strategic and competitive realities. Board leadership must efficiently transact board business to create expanded bandwidth for review and discussion of strategic issues and priorities. Committee structures, charters and agendas should be reconceived to support and increase capacity for effective strategy, agility and transformation.

Trustee skills and board composition

Board effectiveness is a function of the skills and experience of those serving as trustees. As noted, many have personal and family connections to the institution, which can increase their inclination to donate and inform their perspective on board decisions. It may also limit their objectivity and openness to change.

To increase the effectiveness of governance and better consider stakeholder interests, HEI presidents and board leaders should draw upon the concept of “independent directors” of publicly traded, for-profit corporations, which is intended to expand the expertise and objectivity of board members. Such individuals could be sought from inside and outside the postsecondary education sector, with expertise in innovation, education technology, digital transformation and other pertinent areas. As in the business sector, HEIs might utilize consultants to help identify qualified and interested board candidates.

Board members regularly contribute valuable expertise gained through education, professional and volunteer experiences. This includes expertise in finance, investments, real estate, legal issues and other HEI-relevant matters. In light of the accelerating economic, technological and other changes impacting postsecondary education, presidents and board leaders should collaboratively review the new skills needed to ensure the board maximizes its strategic orientation and effectiveness.

Board development

While regular training and development for board members is a common aspiration for most HEIs, in practice it is often limited, sporadic and focused on internal topics. Given trustees' busy nature, it can be difficult to commit them to participation.

An informed and strategic mindset for navigating the complex changes impacting the higher education industry and institutions does not occur spontaneously. Rather, it results from sustained engagement and professional development, ensuring that trustees are well informed and positioned to support the education and engagement of other HEI stakeholders.

A summary of these and other dimensions of strategic governance, contrasted to common board practices, is detailed in Appendix 1.

Expert views on the future postsecondary learning enterprise

As boards and presidents embrace strategic governance and aim to shift from traditional to improved practices, how can they get started? What critical issues should they be considering? The range of potential issues is wide and priorities will differ, of course, from one HEI to another.

Using a snowball sampling strategy, we identified a group of postsecondary education experts with diverse backgrounds, including scholars and authors, institutional change agents, education technologists, university presidents, education entrepreneurs, university trustees, philanthropy leaders and strategy consultants. Using focused interview protocols, we asked them to share their insights regarding next-generation postsecondary institutions and learning opportunities, including the role that technology and digital infrastructure might play. See Appendix 2 for a complete list of experts interviewed.

These postsecondary experts reflected on questions such as:

- What is the future of the postsecondary learning enterprise?
- In what ways has the global pandemic impacted the future of postsecondary learning?
- What was learned from pandemic experiences regarding digital transformation of postsecondary institutions?
- What should the next generation of digital learning infrastructure look like?
- What other forces are driving the future of postsecondary learning?
- What roles should institutional governing boards play in the strategic consideration of such issues?

“The pull of hybrid learning will almost be inescapable. Higher education institutions should see hybrid learning as the core model, with fully in-person and fully online at the ends of the spectrum.”

Jamie Merisotis,
Lumina Foundation

The experts’ responses provide compelling insights for senior postsecondary leaders, including presidents, trustees and chief academic and financial officers. They identified multiple strategic issues to prompt and focus boards’ work on achieving effective strategic governance. Here are several areas in which we found expert consensus:

The new normal: Hybrid, flexible delivery models

The future of postsecondary learning will be flexible, fluid, hybrid and porous. Despite student and faculty concerns about quality, the pandemic experience dissolved much of the remaining resistance to distance learning among faculty and students. The hybrid of online and in-person modalities will expand and will press all HEIs to rethink delivery models, which are currently anchored primarily in place and time to create greater fluidity among types of learning experiences.¹² “While we shouldn’t extrapolate too much from higher education’s emergency COVID responses, there are many learnings and opportunities that have come from recent experiences,” said former Yale President Rick Levin. “We need to diversify the means of delivering education and a hybrid of online and live methods is the future.”

The challenge for HEIs will be to draw from their pandemic experiences to gain clarity on the model (or models) they will adopt. This will require careful consideration of the needs of the students they serve, preserving unique dimensions of learning experiences, the critical wraparound services needed for student success and whether HEIs can lower costs to students.

Digital transformation and infrastructure for student success

Anticipating students’ continued preference for flexible learning models, HEIs must examine the status of their digital transformation and the quality of their digital infrastructure. Experts agreed that most institutions lack adequate infrastructure and need to focus on creating one-stop digital systems and service portals to eliminate the barriers that frustrate students and improve the student experience.

That said, our experts strongly concurred on some critical caveats. Uniformly, they asserted that HEIs must focus on learners first and technology second. Digital systems are a tool, not a singular solution, and the human component will always be the most important one. “Digital transformation takes significant effort. Technology is a tool, but not a panacea. It is a combination of technology, people and processes,” argued Nina Huntemann, Chief Academic Officer at Chegg, Inc. “Conversations start at the top with the president and provost, but then you get ‘under the hood’ and there are a lot of people who need to be involved to make it happen.”

“Digital transformation is about improving the institution’s ability to meet and support learners where they are along their specific learning pathways.”

Alison Griffin,
Whiteboard
Advisors

Thus, HEIs must work to determine where high-impact human interactions occur and where technology can play a role. Ultimately, the goal is equitable student success, which requires supporting and prioritizing people; technology and digital transformation must serve those primary purposes. As higher education futurist Bryan Alexander remarked, “It is not technology that will drive things, but rather the goal of meeting students where they are. It will be about a push to do what makes students succeed.”

Transforming HEIs into learning organizations

Experts agreed that HEIs must evolve beyond the traditional model of being primarily providers of two- and four-year degrees to becoming “learning organizations.” They cited multiple factors influencing this need: the fast-changing nature of in-demand skills in an increasingly digital and technology-driven economy; learners’ growing preference for shorter credentials; issues of learner and credit-hour mobility between multiple HEIs; the significant growth in non-institutional providers and credentials, increasing the need to evaluate and recognize non-institutional learning and credentials; and the clear link between ongoing learning and economic advancement.

But such external forces will necessitate internal changes for HEIs. Lumina Foundation President Jamie Merisotis cautioned that, “Higher education must see individuals as students who will regularly return over the course of their careers. But today, lifelong learning is very institution-centric and hard on learners. We need institutions to shift to a people-centric model.”

Thus, HEIs must envision how they will serve learners across their careers and lifetimes, far beyond time spent in on-campus, traditional degree programs. Such changes will require further consideration of how to develop digital infrastructure that can support lifelong learning communities at scale. Further, HEIs must understand the changing nature of credentials to determine how they will “unbundle” them and rethink both pricing and cost—all in the context of emerging non-institutional competitors and substitutes. “Institutions are exploring new modalities of learning, and leveraging the power of novel educational technology and translational research in ways that help us think beyond time-in-degree to give shape to a more data-informed lifewide and lifelong curriculum,” noted Associate Vice Provost for Academic Innovation at the University of Michigan James DeVaney. “But we haven’t fully adjusted our thinking regarding pricing. If we exhaust an individual’s education spending by the time they finish a first degree, we can’t reasonably expect them to engage in a range of learning and credentialing experiences over the course of their lifetimes. Without attention to this issue, there will be significant demand—but no ability to pay. If institutions don’t lead the conversation, we will simply see a pivot toward ability to pay that will favor certain populations and undercut our collective commitment to access and equity.”

“Institutions should be thinking about lifelong learning as an opportunity to maintain ongoing connections with their students. There is no reason that an institution should not seek to have a lifelong relationship with its alumni. Why would it not want to be each alums’ lifetime preferred provider?”

Peter Stokes, Huron Consulting Group

“Instructional Design was a very marginal topic until the pandemic—but it has been rediscovered. It improves student outcomes and that is both a student success and an economic argument. But it doesn’t scale easily and requires resources, faculty engagement and buy-in.”

Bryan Alexander,
Georgetown
University

The learning innovation imperative

The expected rise in hybrid and flexible learning models and the rapid growth of education technologies will require HEIs to increase their investments in high-quality learning design and faculty development. These factors directly relate to the critical questions: What will the future of learning look like at our HEI? How will our HEI support faculty in developing new, high-quality models to promote student learning and success?

“There is recognition that many faculty did not have adequate pedagogical training in remote learning during the pandemic, especially early on,” noted Cynthia Wilson of the League for Innovation in the Community College. “They want and need professional development and to better understand how to support student success and completion in remote learning environments.” Learning and instructional design expertise will need to expand at most institutions to leverage learning science, technology and faculty expertise. Additionally, HEIs will need greater incentives, resources and formal development for faculty to support their engagement and adoption.

Further, given the accelerating growth of education technologies impacting every dimension of the learning experience, HEIs need to develop—on their own or collaboratively—learning R&D laboratories to support faculty experimentation and innovation. They should bring the research orientation of the institution to bear to support data-driven experimentation in pedagogy and learning. As Dale Johnson of Arizona State’s University Design Institute urged, “Don’t be afraid to experiment and to fail. Institutions need to bring the research brain of the university to bear, to be in the pursuit of new knowledge. It takes patience and persistence to tackle critical learning and success challenges. We need to create academic flexibility, incentives and support for faculty to experiment.”

Seizing the moment and improving strategic board governance

Lastly, our experts boldly underlined two of the primary themes of this report. First, HEIs must seize the moment that the pandemic has presented them, and take advantage of open minds and recent experience. They must look beyond the crisis to see the longer term and the opportunities it presents. “This moment may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for higher education,” argued Joshua Kim, Dartmouth College’s director of online programs and strategy. “It’s a good time for change and people’s minds are open. All of the sacred cows are dead and our institutions are still alive. The imperative for change starts with the trustees and presidents. But the window of opportunity will pass, so institutions must act now.”

Thus, boards must play a more catalytic role in creating change by being vital thought partners, asking questions about the HEI's future and championing a culture of experimentation, change and innovation. Similarly, boards must examine their membership and consider whether they have the right individuals to play such roles and ensure that HEI leaders and stakeholders are actively working to develop the next-generation postsecondary learning enterprise. Southern New Hampshire University's Paul LeBlanc questioned, "Who is on your board of trustees? Presidents and boards need a checklist of needed skills and backgrounds to think critically about this. Do you have people with relevant knowledge to be able to ask better questions, to be a thought partner in envisioning the future of the institution?"

This will also require significant board and trustee development at HEIs. Colorado public university board chair and Whiteboard Advisors Senior Vice President, Alison Griffin, noted, "The majority of public university trustees have never been a part of conversations regarding how to improve digital infrastructure, student experiences and productive partnerships. We need to educate trustees nationally—otherwise they cannot govern effectively and lead the future of higher education." This imperative applies to trustees at both public and independent HEIs.

Key questions and recommendations for strategic governance

Answers begin with questions

Additional questions are offered here to help board leaders and presidents catalyze strategic governance conversations that frame future-oriented issues and engage key leaders and stakeholders in structured activities to find answers.

- How strategic is our board and how adequate are composition and board member skills?
- What is our HEI's vision for the future of learning and the postsecondary learning enterprise?
- What learning and experience does our HEI take away from the pandemic and how will it inform our future?
- How will our HEI take advantage of this window of opportunities for change and innovation?
- What are our competitive strengths and weaknesses as an institution?
- Given pandemic experiences, what models of hybrid or flexible learning should our HEI consider?
- How should our HEI position itself to provide more education, more effectively, more often, across a greater span of adolescence and adulthood, to more people, at a lower and more sustainable cost?
- How is our HEI innovating the nature and types of credentials it provides?
- What is the status of our HEI's digital transformation and learning infrastructure—and what will be needed to achieve our vision and support student and faculty success?

- How are we investing in our capacity for innovative learning design and faculty support?
- What R&D capacity does our HEI have to experiment with education technologies, pedagogy, new tools, programs and models to support innovation?
- What partnerships and alliances will help our HEI expand its ability to serve learners more effectively?

Boards must work with presidents to create defined, resourced and collaborative processes through which answers to these questions can be sought and action plans proposed. They must also hold HEI leaders and stakeholders accountable for meaningful outcomes. Answers to important questions about how strategic governance might be most effectively applied across the diverse range of HEIs are provided in Appendix 3.

Key recommendations for strategic governance

It is time to significantly raise the bar for HEI trusteeship and board leadership in the United States. Some states require trustee training to support effective trusteeship. This is valuable and should be expanded to apply to trustees of both public and independent nonprofit HEIs.

Accrediting bodies should also require, on an annual basis as part of regular reporting processes, documented evidence of robust and regular trustee training. Such evidence should be demonstrated in comprehensive, mid-point and other periodic accreditation self-studies, reviews and reports.

National organizations such as the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), American Council on Education (ACE) and others should collaborate to create a rigorous trustee training and certification program that requires the demonstration of mastery of a relevant body of knowledge and regular professional development and recertification activities. Specific elements of such programs could be tailored for trustees serving at various types of HEIs, based on Carnegie Classification and sector (public or independent). Institutions should then publicly disclose the number of certified trustees serving on their boards and in board leadership. Models of such certification programs already exist outside postsecondary education for directors of for-profit (both public and private) and nonprofit entities.¹³

Such higher education-specific certification programs should equip trustees with a future-focused orientation and a continually updated understanding of key trends and forces altering the postsecondary learning environment. Program content should be overseen and regularly updated by subject-matter experts from inside and outside higher education.

Once such certification programs are available, state laws and regulations related to training for trustees of public or other postsecondary institutions should be amended to require certification and recertification—and both states and institutions should invest adequate resources to ensure that all trustees participate and benefit. Such programs will bring added prestige and competence to these critical roles.

Successful closure of the strategic governance gaps described herein will depend upon implementation of these recommendations. Without question, these new approaches are urgently needed to renew the strength and success of American postsecondary institutions of all kinds.

Appendices

Appendix 1. The Strategic Board

Common practices	Shift to strategic governance
Focus and Core Roles	
Common fiduciary role and activities: Executive hiring/firing, evaluation Budget and investment review and approval Academic policies and actions: appointments, program approval, degree conferrals Risk assessments	Elevates the innovation imperative Future-focused, future ready Governance and organizational agility Future readiness and business model transformation Partnerships, strategic alliances, new ventures
Strategy Orientation	
Present-focused Attention on current-year activities and next-year plans Annual budgets Short- and intermediate-term focus Traditional strategic plans and planning models Internal activity focus	Prospective orientation Expanded support for strategy development Promoting an intermediate- and long-term focus External and competitive landscape focus New strategic planning frameworks Strategic positioning Supports innovation agenda
Change Orientation	
Status quo, conservative or change-averse Incremental Reactive Crisis-driven Focus on legacy enterprise	Change-oriented Anticipating, identifying and navigating external change Proactive and adaptive Transformation-focused Opportunity-focused Competitive agility Consideration of future learning enterprise
Trustee Engagement and Time	
Transactional, focused on action item approvals Reporting, informing and updating “Show and tell” reports with passive involvement Arm’s length relationship with board: “Isolate and tolerate” Engagement with a fundraising focus Traditional committees, roles and assignments (executive, finance/audit, academic affairs, fundraising, nominations) Vague roles, non-specific assignments	Educating and engaging Expertise-leveraging, utilizing trustees as strategic asset Reconsider board agenda structure Regular strategy review and discussion New, strategy-focused committees or working groups (strategy, technology, partnerships/alliances, etc.) New or special advisory groups or advisors to support strategic focus Clearer roles, requests, assignments to support more active, directed involvement and engagement Transformational focus
Trustee Skills and Board Composition	
Alumni, donor or personal connection Fundraising/capacity to give Finance or other expertise (business, real estate, etc.)	Independent directors New members, new skills, strategic orientations Strategy expertise and insights Expanded technology, business model, higher education innovation expertise
Board Development	
Initial orientation Limited, sporadic and voluntary Institution-focused Present-focused Limited evaluation	Structured, regular, ongoing and required development Capacity and expertise building Current and emerging issues Strategic focus and orientation External and competitive landscape Outside expert-supported Regular evaluation and effectiveness-oriented

Appendix 2. Perspectives on the future postsecondary learning enterprise – expert interview participants

Bryan Alexander Senior Scholar, Department of Learning and Design, Georgetown University

Ryan Craig Managing Director, University Ventures

Flower Darby Associate Director, Teaching for Learning Center, University of Missouri

James DeVaney Associate Vice Provost for Academic Innovation and Founding Executive Director of the Center for Academic Innovation, University of Michigan

James Genone Managing Director of Higher Education Innovation, Minerva Project

Alison Griffin Senior Vice President, Whiteboard Advisors and Board Chair, Colorado Mesa University

Michael Horn Senior Strategist, Guild Education

Nina Huntemann Chief Academic Officer, Chegg, Inc.

Dale Johnson Director of Digital Innovation, University Design Institute, Arizona State University

Shalin Jyotishi Senior Policy Analyst, New America

John Katzman Founder and President, Noodle Education

Joshua Kim Director of Online Programs and Strategy, Dartmouth College

Paul LeBlanc President, Southern New Hampshire University

Rick Levin President Emeritus, Yale University and Former CEO, Coursera

Robert Lytle Principal and Global Head of Education, EY-Parthenon

Jamie Merisotis President and CEO, Lumina Foundation

Matthew Rascoff Vice Provost for Digital Education, Stanford University

Peter Stokes Managing Director, Huron Consulting Group

Michelle Weiss Entrepreneur-in-Residence, Imaginable Futures and Senior Advisor, Brighthive

Cynthia Wilson Vice President for Learning and Chief Impact Officer, League for Innovation in the Community College

Appendix 3. Questions and answers – applying strategic governance

Q: Trustees at many public higher education systems and institutions are appointed by government officials or elected to serve, sometimes politicizing institutional governance. Is the idea of strategic governance relevant to such contexts?

A: The means of a trustee's appointment does not alter the fundamental duties and responsibilities that they assume through their service. While HEI leaders are not able to select their trustees, they can work diligently with board leadership to ensure that they are well-oriented and trained, develop adequate content knowledge and embrace a strategic perspective as an important part of their fiduciary roles. This includes helping them understand and embrace principles of shared governance, as well as critical distinctions between governance and management. These issues underline the value of trustee development and the potential benefits of trustee certification.

Q: Trustees at many institutions are recruited to engage their willingness to fundraise and donate to the institution. Will this financially important opportunity be altered by a shift to a board more focused on strategic governance?

A: Wealth, wisdom and work are often cited as the primary contributions that trustees make to HEIs—though views about their prioritization differ. They do not need to be seen as mutually exclusive and many trustees are certainly capable of all three and more. Presidents, board leaders and nominating committees must think critically about board size, terms, composition, skill sets and the strategic orientation of trustees. Thinking creatively about emeritus or honorary status, advisory board roles and other opportunities for engagement are important. Board and board committee leaders must play important roles in clarifying the vision and expectations and in educating about needed shifts that will cultivate strategic governance. Ultimately, trustees and others are more likely to contribute financially when they are motivated by a compelling vision for the institution, its future-readiness and the success of its learners. Strategic governance is critical to raising their sights to those.

Q: Our small HEI already struggles to manage and support our board of trustees in an effective way. How would we find the resources—human and other—to support a shift to strategic governance?

A: Admittedly, effective board engagement and development are time- and resource-consuming. Presidential and board staff at many HEIs are already quite occupied with the existing transactional elements of board- and board committee-related work. Yet, allocating adequate staff, time, money and support in the transition to strategic governance is essential and must be viewed as a long-term investment. Additionally, such additional expenses should be viewed in comparison to the very real and high costs resulting from the strategic governance gaps described in this report. A strategic governance approach may result in the more efficient use of HEI resources, but it

is also likely to generate additional demand for resources, including investments in innovative initiatives. This further illustrates some of the challenges that small, tuition-driven institutions with limited endowments face and the pressure for resourcefulness and collaboration.

Q: We have a full contingent of board members. A shift to a strategic governance orientation will require a shift in people and skill sets. How can that be accomplished?

A: Strong, strategic boards are never an accident. As noted, board size, terms, composition, expertise and skill sets are vital considerations. Presidents must work closely with board leaders to do a structured assessment of such factors and to develop specific short- and long-term plans for transforming board membership and cultivating a strategic orientation. Nominating committees are critical and must be educated and supported in playing their roles. In the short term, increasing purposeful board development and developing other committees or advisory groups to help influence the strategic shift are important—and can serve as a proving ground for future board recruits.

Q: Is the notion of strategic governance applicable to highly selective HEIs with large endowments and global brands, or primarily to those that are less selective and tuition-driven?

A: The forces impacting postsecondary education, noted in this and other NGDLI research briefs, will not discriminate. All HEIs will be affected, though in different ways and to varying extents, and all are in a position to gain from access to significant board and other expertise to support strategic governance actions. While pressure to change the traditional undergraduate learning experience at elite HEIs may not be high, these institutions have opportunities and resources to support investments in learning design capacity, faculty support, learning research and experimentation with new models.

Some experts assert that elite HEIs with global brands that invest in robust digital learning infrastructure will be in a particularly strong position to capture growing demand for diverse offerings of non-degree credentials. Similarly, given their resources and strong alumni connections, such HEIs will have advantages in pioneering models to be lifelong providers of learning beyond the traditional degree experience. Such HEIs can play a critical role in validating concepts of the “learning organization” that can address alumni’s continuum of learning needs across life and career.

Q: Trustee certification is a nice idea, but is it a realistic goal? Will it decrease the interest of qualified people to serve on an HEI board?

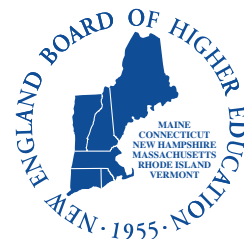
A: Most trustees are motivated by a sincere desire to meaningfully contribute to the success of the HEI, as well as by the honor, recognition and visibility of board service. Both factors can incentivize their willingness to invest time and energy in formal

development and certification. This is more likely to be the case when the president and board leaders make a strong case for the importance of strategic governance and help trustees make the connection between their engagement and the HEI's success in becoming future-ready.

Admittedly, some trustees might be deterred by the idea of having to demonstrate their mastery of content knowledge related to effective board service. While all boards should insist on rigorous board development requirements and participation by all trustees, some might opt to make certification exams optional. Building a culture around board training will take time and the extent and rigor can increase over time.

Endnotes

- 1 Thomas, M.K. "Presidential Perspectives on Building Next-Generation Postsecondary Digital Learning Enterprises." Survey Report, November 2021. New England Board of Higher Education.
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- 8 See: American Association of University Professors. "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities." Accessed April 4, 2022. <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>
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- 9 Mintzberg, H. "The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning." Harvard Business Review. 1994. Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://hbr.org/1994/01/the-fall-and-rise-of-strategic-planning>.
- 10 See the varied principles related to board involvement in strategy outlined in the National Association of Corporate Directors, "NACD Blue Ribbon Commission on Strategy Development," 2014.
- 11 See: Stoeber, H. "Elevating Board Performance in the New Era of Extreme Innovation and Risk." NACD BoardTalk. August 30, 2018. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://blog.nacdonline.org/posts/elevating-board-performance-risk>.
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- 12 Such views align strongly with those of HEI presidents we surveyed in 2021, cited above, who indicated that their institutions intended to increase hybrid (both online and on-campus) learning and other support services as a consequence of the pandemic.
- 13 A prominent example is the National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) Directorship Certification program which includes a required professional development course and a certification exam. <https://certification.nacdonline.org/>.



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