

The Reach of Civic Engagement: The Impact of Student Trustees on Campus and Beyond

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1. Executive Summary

Student Trustees (also called Student Regents, Student Representatives, Student members, etc.) are students who serve on higher education governing boards, oftentimes with full voting powers, to represent the views and desires of the student body (Birnbaum & D’Heilly, 1971). The student trusteeship emerged from the amalgamation of three intertwined historical events: first, the counterculture of the 60’s and 70’s, which led students to both question and challenge authority; second, students’ resistance to the Vietnam war draft and lack of support of the war effort overall, which led to protests and demonstrations on college campuses; and third, the Kent State University shooting in Ohio which occurred during a peaceful campus protest and resulted in the deaths of four unarmed students at the hands of the Ohio National Guard (*Student Regent*, 2024). These three events simultaneously inspired and enraged students across the nation and led students to vie for seats on higher education governing boards to ensure their voices would be heard (Lozano, 2016). As students feared for their safety and wellbeing on their college campuses, they urged the boards of their institutions to include students in the decision-making process (Birnbaum & D’Heilly, 1971; Lozano, 2016). Incrementally, students began to appear on higher education governing boards as early as 1968 and have continued to be incorporated at institutions across the nation as recently as 2020. Although the student trusteeship has expanded significantly, 12 state flagship institutions still do not include a student on their boards, and nearly a quarter (23.7%) of student trustees at flagship institutions do not have voting powers.

For our research project, we sought to understand the student trusteeship at the macro level by exploring the nation’s flagship institutions, as well as what we, as scholars with ties to California, are considering the micro level, by looking at the student trusteeship within California’s higher education systems, including the University of California (UC), the California State University (CSU), and the California Community Colleges (CCCs).

For the macro level, we wanted to know: 1) how prevalent the student trusteeship is across the nation, which we determined by looking at the history of the student trusteeship at 50 U.S. flagship institutions; 2) the timeline of the implementation of the student trusteeship at the nation’s flagship institutions; 3) the qualifications and requirements for student trustees in comparison to lay trustees; and, 4) whether student trustees at the nation’s flagships held voting powers.

For the micro level, our interest revolved around student trustees’ career trajectories and civic engagement. Specifically, we looked at 1) the distribution of student trustees across their respective systems’ institutions (i.e., which UCs, CSUs, and CCCs were student trustees attending when they were appointed?); 2) the fields and careers in which former student trustees currently work; 3) the areas/ fields in which student trustees participated in civic engagement; 4) the impact of student trustees at their respective campuses and beyond into their communities; and, 5) whether student trustees demonstrated a history of volunteerism beyond their role as student trustees and into their adult lives.

Our methodology included document and, by extension, website analysis. We utilized institutional websites including landing pages and designated pages, such as those for the board or student associations, which we assessed first to gather preliminary data. We also referenced board bylaws to determine effective appointment dates and when in question, confirmation was solicited via email to the board's secretary or through board information request forms, of which some, but not all, were confirmed. Another primary source of information was individuals' LinkedIn profiles, which were primarily used to determine employment and volunteer history, when available. Direct webpages of individuals' places of employment that included photos and bios were also used. Finally, individuals' trustee appointment announcements in various news articles and from campus news sources were also used to cross-reference.

We recognize that relying upon LinkedIn and other social media profiles for accuracy of employment and service descriptions means the individual's claims are assumed, but not confirmed. One flaw we encountered with document analysis stemmed from women's name changes after marriage—many women did not retain their maiden names and were thus much more difficult to locate, which led to gaps in our data. Furthermore, a lack of availability of attending institutions for the CCCs, a crucial piece of information for locating more distantly appointed trustees, led to a sparse dataset. Additionally, board bylaws were often unclear on when particular amendments were enacted and on occasion it was difficult to determine at what point a student trustee gained a seat on the board for some flagship institutions. However, most of these were confirmed with the respective board's office. Ultimately, document analysis proved to be a fruitful methodology for answering our initial inquiries.

We learned that there are typically two paths to becoming a student trustee, either by an application and appointment process, or by automatic appointment of the student body president. At approximately 15% of the nation's flagship institutions with student trustees, the student body president is automatically appointed. At the remaining institutions, student trustees follow an election process which varies from campus to campus, but typically includes an application, letters of recommendation, a nomination from a campus entity, an interview, and an appointment confirmation at the governor's office. The California systems adhere to the latter process. Student trustees must meet qualification requirements, which usually include being a U.S. citizen and oftentimes, also a resident of the state of the institution they are attending, being currently enrolled, full-time students, and meeting and maintaining a minimum GPA requirement. Once appointed, student trustees are typically required to attend either the totality of, or a designated number of, trustee board meetings. Students may also be required to attend events, collaborate with other student and administrative leaders on campus, and, in the case of the California institutions, visit other campuses within the system. At institutions where students hold voting powers, they are also expected to vote on all matters presented.

Nearly one-third of the nation's flagship institutions (31.6%) have two or more student trustees serving on their board; this is also true for California's systems, where the CSU and CCC systems have two student trustees serving at a time, and the UC system has one student serve as Regent and another

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serve as a non-voting Regent Designate for their first year as they learn how to participate on the board. Student trustees typically serve one or two-year terms. At the CSU and CCC systems, student trustees serve two-year terms, while at the UC, the student regent serves as designate for one year and serves a one-year term thereafter. At the CSU and CCC systems, student trustees are fairly evenly distributed, meaning they come from a variety of institutions within the system. At the UC schools, however, student regents overwhelmingly come predominantly from the Berkeley and LA campuses.

Although student trustees in the California systems have varying career trajectories, many assume roles in education, government, and law, and the majority hold leadership roles in their fields. The top fields we narrowed down were 'Education,' 'Government,' 'Law,' 'Leadership,' and 'Advocacy.' Under 'Education,' student trustees worked in roles as professors, teachers, principals, deans, and chancellors. Within 'Government,' student trustees took on roles as senators, mayors, legislators, and politicians. Within 'Law,' student trustees worked as lawyers, judges, and attorneys. Within 'Advocacy,' student trustees worked for nonprofits, were philanthropists, or worked in DEI roles. Student trustees were grouped under one or more categories if their careers expanded across one individual field, for example, a university dean would be categorized under both 'Education' and 'Leadership.' Due to this approach to categorization and the level to which student trustees attained leadership roles in their fields, leadership was the most heavily populated category.

A similar approach to categorizing civic engagement was also used with the California system's student trustees. Civic engagement was defined using the American Psychological Association's definition, which states that civic engagement is:

individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. (APA, 2009)

Student Trustees' civic engagement was determined by volunteer time spent beyond the scope of their role as student trustees. Involvement in federal, state, local, and/or community organizations, volunteer work with various populations, participating in or establishing supportive and/or inclusive clubs and organizations on campus, and conducting advocacy/allyship work on and off campus are some of the ways student trustees demonstrated civic engagement. The same categories utilized for career fields were also used for civic engagement. The top categories for civic engagement were 'Education,' 'Advocacy,' 'Boards,' 'Government,' and 'Leadership.' Student trustees frequently served on governing boards beyond their respective universities and took the initiative to establish their own clubs, organizations, nonprofits, and advocacy groups, which led 'Boards,' 'Leadership,' and 'Advocacy' to be the most heavily populated categories for civic engagement. We also found that many student trustees went on to live lives of volunteerism beyond their time at their universities. 41.5% of UC Student Regents, 9.4% of CSU Student Trustees, and 11.1% of CCC Student Representatives were

included in the category of 'Adult Volunteerism,' which was established by identifying individuals who self-reported volunteer work beyond their graduation date.

Ultimately, our work illuminated that students are achieving a growing presence on higher education governing boards. With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, protests against police brutality, the #MeToo movement, demonstrations for abortion rights, and protests across college campuses fighting for living wages and affordable tuition, student activism is at an all-time high, and students will continue to fight for a place on governing boards at the remaining holdout institutions who have yet to include student representation. In the 1970's, Birnbaum and D'Heilly recognized the increasing prevalence of the student trusteeship, and their study found that the inclusion of student trustees led to the diversification of not only board composition, but the diversification of views represented on higher education governing boards (Birnbaum & D'Heilly, 1971). In the 1980's and 1990's, Altbach and Cohen illuminated the many linkages between student activism and the demand from students for their perspectives to be included in the decision-making process of higher education administrators and leaders (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). Given the prioritization of DEI initiatives, the ever-present student activism within higher education institutions (HEIs), and the growing demographic diversity of study bodies, it is intuitive that the student trusteeship will continue to expand. The student trusteeship legitimizes student activism and provides students with a formal platform to ensure their voices and perspectives are heard.

Thus, our research leads us to the following recommendations:

1. HEIs without student trustees should consider expanding their boards and amending their bylaws to include a student representative. The student trustee should be a valued member of the board with the same level of power and influence as a lay trustee. With the growing diversity of student bodies and the larger age gap with more senior trustees, student representation is all the more influential (and warranted) on campuses.
2. HEIs with student trustees that do not currently have voting powers should amend their bylaws to allow student representatives full voting rights, just as lay trustees possess. Furnishing voting powers will signify to the student population that the board takes the students' perspectives seriously and could lead student trustees to be even more invested in their role on the board.
3. HEIs need to implement data collection and archiving practices that validate and reaffirm the importance of the student trusteeship. Our research illuminated that HEIs often have very limited data on their student trustees, but information on lay trustees is more substantial and more accessible. The student trusteeship should be valued to the same level as the lay trusteeship. Governing Board offices should keep detailed records on the history of the student trusteeship and make this information more widely available.
4. The opportunities for student trusteeship should have greater visibility. In order to increase the number and diversity of students who are represented on the boards, it is essential that students understand what board service is and that they can serve in this capacity.