

The Student Advocate's Guide to Strengthening Institutional Supports

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Understanding the current landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across institutional supports (e.g., academic advising, mentorship programs, and career services) can empower students to advocate for institutions to address disparities in student outcomes. This understanding is crucial, especially as vital student support programs are being defunded, deprioritized, removed, and/or censored on campuses nationwide, weakening the very supports students rely on. This moment calls for students to collectively engage with and activate higher education leaders and stakeholders.

These questions are designed to help student advocates create cross-institutional dialogue with stakeholders to build connections and develop an advocacy strategy alongside allies, legislative champions, and spokespeople. The goal is to align priorities and translate conversation into action within the classroom, at the institutional level, during legislative sessions, and within the local community. Students can use these insights to secure, strengthen, and expand access to academic programs and identify available resources to improve a sense of belonging and student outcomes. This serves as a starting point for a coordinated, institution-wide action committed to every learner's holistic success across the higher education ecosystem. Student success extends beyond graduation and economic productivity to encompass career and academic pathways, civic engagement, and personal well-being. Given that higher education governance structures, appointment processes, sources of authority, and oversight may differ, students should consider their institution's unique governance structure and contexts.

As students engage in these conversations, they should aim to leave each discussion with a clear understanding of accountability, decision-making processes, and next steps. Students are encouraged to ask targeted questions such as: *What can you commit to changing this semester? What data would change your mind? Who has the authority to approve this? What funding would be required? When should students expect an answer? If nothing changes, who is accountable?*

These questions are designed to move conversations beyond acknowledgment toward measurable action, transparency, and shared responsibility.

The Role of Presidents, Chancellors, and Provosts

As institutional executive leaders, presidents, chancellors, and provosts are responsible for carrying out their institution's mission. They guide institutional priorities, influence resource allocation, and voice the college or university's impact and concerns to the broader public, policymakers, and governing boards. While executive leaders prioritize student success, they must also weigh competing interests such as enrollment and retention, financial stability, academic quality, institutional reputation, and relationships with policymakers, donors, and governing boards. It is important for student advocates to understand these priorities and the weight they carry when crafting an advocacy plan that ensures leaders make decisions that advance equitable and inclusive outcomes for all students. Engaging with executive leadership gives students an opportunity to elevate their advocacy priorities and experiences directly to those with formal authority. As time with institutional leaders may be limited, it is crucial for student advocates to prepare in advance by researching institutional priorities, student success initiatives, recent public statements from leadership, and more.

By entering these conversations informed and prepared, students can ask focused, strategic questions that clearly connect their experiences to institutional goals and student success outcomes. Building a relationship and communication channel with executive leadership will help advance institution-wide supports and initiatives to drive student success. The following questions are designed to help student advocates better understand how their executive leaders measure and advance student success.

Questions to Support Data Use in Decision-Making

- What data are we collecting on student success across populations (age, race, socioeconomic status, ability, language, etc.)?
- Do we understand where opportunity gaps exist across the student population and what programs need to be put into place to bridge those gaps and increase student success outcomes?
- Are we using data to evaluate the long-term impact of student success programs or initiatives? If so, which data?
- What information is used to make decisions about the consolidation or closure of degree programs, and do faculty and department chairs from different degree programs have an opportunity to weigh in during the decision-making process?

Questions to Enhance Transparency in Executive Priority-Setting

- Is there an opportunity to involve the most impacted students in discussions about potential program changes, particularly when opportunities exist to strengthen or build upon programs rather than reduce or eliminate them?
- How do we distribute institutional funding to fairly support all programs, disciplines, and research approaches?
- How can we effectively demonstrate to external stakeholders the long-term value of degree programs (e.g., programs leading to high-value but low-wage careers) that are at risk of consolidation or funding cuts?
- What is the institution's plan if funding for programming, financial aid, or student supports is cut?

- How does your understanding of student outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, student loan repayment rates, earnings, and more) inform institutional strategy?
- How does students' sense of belonging, particularly as it relates to their identity and campus experience, affect their graduation rates and subsequent career outcomes?
- How does our school's financial strategy ensure predictable and equitable tuition pricing and consistent financial aid throughout a student's enrollment?

Questions to Align Executive Leadership Efforts With Institutional Stakeholder Needs

- How do institutional leaders define student success, and what structures, processes, and communication strategies are in place to ensure that supporting the success of diverse student populations is a shared institutional responsibility? Are student success goals tied to executive performance reviews?
- How can we use longitudinal alumni data on career outcomes, educational attainment, and economic and social mobility, alongside other mechanisms to gather timely feedback from institutional stakeholders to better advocate with trustees, policymakers, and donors?
- What accountability and transparency policies exist for stakeholders to monitor how their input shapes institutional policies, resource allocation, and strategic direction?
- Do we honor teach-out policies and matriculation agreements with institutions for majors we no longer teach?

Questions for Creating a Safe and Supportive Campus Climate

- What processes exist to assess the state of belonging and inclusion in the learning, working, and living environment on campus for students, faculty, and staff?
- What policies exist to limit and/or stop ICE and other immigrant enforcement officials from entering school property to undertake enforcement actions?
- What resources are available for students to file impartial complaints related to race or sex-based discrimination and harassment? Are dedicated staff, such as Title IX coordinators, equipped to conduct professional and impartial investigations when discrimination complaints arise?
- What spaces or programs on campus does the university/college maintain that bring together students with a shared interest, identity, or area of study?

To learn more about how presidents, chancellors, and provosts can address financial risks in institutional decision-making, see the Alliance for Higher Education's [Framework for Autonomy in Decision-Making](#).

The Role of Governing Boards

Governing boards, boards of trustees, and regents hold decision-making power to approve budgets, major policies, and strategic plans for long-term institutional direction. These boards work to ensure colleges and universities fulfill their missions, responsibly steward public and private resources, and uphold legal and ethical standards. When governing boards are carefully composed to reflect the student body's makeup with diverse perspectives and disciplines, and are properly onboarded and trained on their roles, responsibilities, and operated transparently, they can protect institutional autonomy and the freedom to learn. Governing boards should be included in any discussions about strategic and systemic long-term change, as they work to bridge current realities with the institutional mission and values. While some governing boards include a student representative, often without voting power, there is still room to increase the frequency with which trustees and regents hear from the student body. Student advocates who can understand and engage governing boards can help ensure student needs are captured in long-term institutional planning.

Questions to Promote Inclusive and Responsive Governance

- How do students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders formally shape the decisions that affect their educational experiences and working conditions?
- How are you working with your president or chancellor to build authentic relationships with students, faculty, staff, and community to inform governance work?
- What open forums exist for board members to ask questions about how the changing policy landscape is affecting students prior to decision-making?
 - Is there dedicated speaking time for student and faculty leaders at board meetings?
- How often is the board evaluated for its effectiveness, and who conducts these evaluations? Do the assessment criteria include responsiveness to student needs?
 - What continuing education exists for board members related to the unique needs of the community, demographic shifts, and campus climate trends?
- How is the sitting student position on the board included in decision-making as a representation of the student body? Do they have voting power?
- How are students' public comments considered before decisions are made? Is it transparent which comments were considered and how they influenced the final decision?
- Is the current measure of student success and outcomes assessed by student subgroups to ensure any gaps are made visible?

Questions to Promote Responsible Governance

- How do data-informed insights and institutional mission guide funding decisions that affect academic offerings and research endeavors?

- What processes exist to ensure that both are jointly considered?
- How does the board ensure appropriate caution in overseeing donor agreements so that funding for academic programs and research does not influence the independence of academic activities?
- What guardrails prevent donors or other political interests from influencing the curriculum or course offerings? How does the board of trustees or regents use its oversight role — including questioning and review of disaggregated quantitative data alongside student narratives — to ensure institutional decisions reflect the lived experiences of students and remain aligned with the college/university mission?
- Do provosts, department chairs, and experts in academia have autonomy to ensure various viewpoints with academic merit are presented to students?

Questions to Support a Safe and Supportive Campus Climate

- Do board members and institutional leaders participate in ongoing training and/or professional development to understand current social, political, and economic realities and the impact of their decisions on students, faculty, and staff?
- What specific steps does the board take to identify, address, and prevent discrimination, particularly for underserved student populations?
 - Which key partners does the board collaborate with on campus to ensure it has all of the information needed to make equitable decisions?
- How does the board evaluate and respond to rising student debt and financial burdens when making fiduciary decisions?
- What strategies is the board pursuing to account for different rates in retention, completion, and postgraduation outcomes for all student populations to improve our school's effectiveness?

To learn more about interacting with governing boards and their sphere of influence, see:

- [How University Governing Boards Can Protect the Independence of Colleges and Universities](#) by the Center for American Progress
- [Education Resources](#) by the Center for Strategic and Inclusive Governance

The Role of Deans and Department Leaders

Deans, department chairs, and program directors oversee academic programs, majors, curriculum, and research endeavors. Because many barriers to students' success occur within programs or departments, these leaders have the authority to make practical changes that directly affect students' academic experience. Courses and majors offered at higher education institutions are driven by funding, staffing, institutional priorities, and student interest. As part of their advocacy role, student advocates must highlight the importance of maintaining a wide array of course offerings that represent diverse viewpoints and support students' academic and career goals.

Strengthening communication channels and relationships with academic leaders will help students be more effective by ensuring their priorities are aligned — and by creating opportunities to share concerns and keep academic leaders informed when priorities diverge. This, in turn, will help student advocates address issues related to program requirements, course offerings, advising practices, and department culture.

Questions to Better Understand How Student Outcomes Inform Curricula and Program Decisions

- To what extent do deans and department leaders understand the professional outcomes of graduates five and 10 years after graduation, disaggregated by major or program?
- What external reporting requirements are you responsible for that influence program review and resource allocation decisions? How can students contribute qualitative data to support these reports?
- What data do department leaders need to validate or strengthen the direction of our institution's academic offerings?
- What questions do deans and department leaders wish they could answer about how changes in access to academic programs are affecting students? What stops you from collecting this data?
- Does the college monitor how scheduling conflicts, unavailable courses, or understaffing impact graduation rates?
- What considerations help you determine recommendations for course consolidation? How do deans determine which programs contribute to students' workforce readiness, career trajectory, and life beyond the classroom?
- How do the identities of our student population and the needs of the surrounding communities influence institutional course offerings?

Questions for Creating a Learning Environment That Recognizes Faculty, Staff, and Student Expertise

- Does the demographic composition of faculty reflect the student body? What is the rate of retention, tenure, and promotion for faculty from underserved backgrounds?
- How do deans and department leaders seek out and hire faculty with varied skills, expertise, and academic perspectives?
- When and how do deans and department leaders monitor and evaluate populations of students that are under-represented in academic programs or have declining success rates?
- How do institutional standards and policies ensure that professors and researchers have the freedom to teach, publish, and share ideas, based on their subject matter expertise, without undue influence from external pressures?
- How are students' research projects and pursuits affirmed and supported by the faculty, academic staff, and advising opportunities?

- What institutional guardrails exist to create a space for faculty and students to engage in academic discussions where they can express and challenge ideas freely, both in and outside of classrooms?
- Does our institution hire faculty with expertise related to different racial, cultural, and ethnic identities? If not, where can students access this knowledge to expand their learning?

To learn more about censorship on campuses, see [Expanding the Web of Control](#) by PEN America.

The Role of Faculty and Staff

Building relationships with faculty and staff is a powerful tool for student advocates. Faculty and staff, who drive the day-to-day academic and operational tasks within your institution, can offer insight into how policies are implemented and how to effectively navigate the institutional landscape. Not only can faculty and staff open doors to committees and decision-makers, but they also have professional networks that extend beyond campus. Their collaboration with colleagues at other institutions and contributions to broader conversations in their field creates cross-institutional connections. These partnerships can help student advocates identify best practices and understand how other campuses have addressed similar challenges. Such connections, when built on mutual understanding, foster collaboration and trust, creating a united coalition that can benefit the student population.

Currently, faculty and staff are facing intense scrutiny for their academic work, including teaching content, course materials, and research. As you build connections with higher education employees, keep in mind that sharing confidential information or openly supporting your cause could jeopardize their employment, particularly if their support is not protected by principles of academic freedom or First Amendment speech protections. Map your allies and reach out to those who are vocal on human and civil rights, the rule of law, DEI, freedom of expression, and/or students' rights.

Questions to Better Understand How Faculty Knowledge and Experiences Influence Institutional Decisions

- How have your former students applied what they learned at this institution and the networks they developed, and how might we use those outcomes to make a formal case for continued support of your role or department?
- What faculty-led research at our institution can demonstrate how higher education contributes to our broader communities?
- Have faculty altered teaching, instructional materials, or research due to funding cuts or fear of retaliation?
- How could alumni feedback on their experiences with faculty advising or mentoring strengthen access to these programs for all learners?
- How could data on professional mobility of students affirm or illustrate the value of your discipline and research?
- What is the role of faculty in institutional decision-making, including areas such as course offerings and content, student discipline, hiring faculty and staff, tenure decisions, and performance reviews?

Questions for Sustaining a Safe and Supportive Campus Climate

- What early identification and intervention systems exist for students struggling academically, before problems escalate?
 - Have faculty been trained to effectively use these systems to identify and support students?
- What protected spaces exist for students to more frequently interact with faculty and staff about their experiences with campus issues (e.g., removal of course content, access to diverse knowledge, identity and belonging, etc.)?
- What connections do you have with faculty and staff at peer institutions that can help build students' organizing power?
- What faculty/staff collectives or coordinated efforts exist regionally or nationally to mutually defend against the removal of academic offerings and other limitations on academic freedom?
- Which staff members are trained to connect students to key resources on campus that meet their unique needs?

To learn more about using collaborative advocacy between faculty, staff, and students to drive change, see [*"First They Came for My College,"* a New College film](#).

The Role of Student Affairs and Financial Aid Offices

Students' basic needs are interconnected, and so are the offices that support them. When essential resources like food run dry, students may divert funds initially intended for rent, transportation, tuition, and childcare toward groceries. This can quickly become a financial aid, retention, or academic success concern. By building relationships with student affairs and financial aid offices, student advocates can help coordinate systemic solutions that address how these pressures show up in real time. A key element of fostering welcoming environments is supporting students' basic needs, such as food security, emergency financial assistance, childcare, and flexibility for those working full time. With collaboration and well-trained advisers, institutions can better align food resources, emergency aid, and other financial supports to provide coordinated, comprehensive assistance for all students.

Questions to Explore How Staff Amplify Student Experiences in Institutional Decision- Making

- How can we leverage co-curricular experiences (e.g., leadership roles, service learning, work-based learning, and student organization involvement) to strengthen long-term career outcomes?
- How can student affairs and financial aid offices partner with institutional research, career services, and external organizations to better understand career and economic mobility outcomes and use these insights to strengthen programming that builds life skills and career readiness?
- How can alumni career data help build stronger mentorship and networking opportunities for current students?

Questions for Sustaining a Safe and Supportive Climate

- How do the unique identities and diverse needs of our student population influence campus programming?
- In what ways does our current student programming prioritize and foster respectful dialogue across differences, especially when navigating challenging or sensitive issues?
- Is there a centralized, easily accessible location where students can go for support with food insecurity, academic challenges, health or personal crises, emergency financial assistance, and other unexpected needs? When are these supports available?
 - Is there an accessible and transparent basic needs navigator to help students apply for federal, state, or local benefits where possible?
- As campus funding is reduced, how can student affairs partner with student organizations to maintain their ability to convene and host programs?
- How do student affairs and financial aid offices leverage institutional data to send targeted outreach emails to populations who may be most impacted, including Pell Grant recipients, Federal Work-Study participants, and student-parents, to connect them with campus basic needs centers and community resources?
- How do financial aid and student affairs offices collaborate to assist students with financial aid appeals and emergency aid applications?
- Does the financial aid office proactively contact students with holds or with balances that could prevent reenrollment?

For more information on indicators of financial well-being and success among postsecondary students nationwide, see the 2024 results of the [Student Financial Wellness Survey](#) by Trellis Strategies.

The Role of Student Government and Student Leaders

Student government associations and student leaders can amplify concerns to highlight patterns across student populations and create collective pressure for change. Student leaders are an accessible entry point for institutional change. Student government associations and student leaders often have formal channels to communicate with administrators and campus leadership. While they strive to represent all students in their decision-making, this is a significant feat for a relatively small group. It is important for student advocates to foster open communication with their student leaders to ensure they hear from students across programs, experiences, and backgrounds. As the body elected to represent student interests, they can elevate student concerns, introduce resolutions, and influence campus priorities to mobilize student engagement.

Questions for Student Leaders

- What power do student leaders hold to create and sustain student support programs that impact student success? What formal policies are in place to protect student leaders' role in this work?
- How could student leaders use data on alumni career paths to help advocate for new programs, internships, and resources that students don't currently have?
- What spaces or programs does the institution maintain and fund that bring together students with shared interests, identities, or academic pursuits?
- Are student leaders trained and prepared to connect students to resources, such as childcare for student-parents, food assistance, affordable housing, and other support services?
- Which student groups are least represented in leadership?
 - How are commuter students, parenting students, online students, first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, immigrant and undocumented students, and working students included and supported in leadership opportunities?
- How are student leaders' perspectives incorporated into university policy? How successful has incorporation of these suggestions been?
- How are student leaders held accountable to the broader student body they represent?

To learn more about campus resolutions for student leaders, see Amnesty International's [Campus Resolution Toolkit](#).

Conclusion

Students have the power to meaningfully shape their institutional experience and the future of higher education. At a time when institutions are making consequential decisions about academic programs, student supports, and resources, student voices and experiences must be included in how those decisions are made.

This resource serves as a starting point for student advocates to turn conversations into action by asking targeted questions, building relationships with decision-makers with formal authority, and holding leaders accountable to clear commitments. Meaningful student engagement means more than having a seat at the table, it is also having a role to shape the policies and practices that are reflective of and responsive to the diverse and evolving needs of the students each institution serves.