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Boardroom Drag and the Policy Infrastructure of Higher Education: Trustee Conduct, Shared Governance, and Institutional Capacity

Mariana Souto-Manning

msouto-manning@erikson.edu

Erikson Institute

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Abstract

This conceptual article examines trustee conduct as an overlooked condition of educational policy implementation in U.S. higher education. Although governing boards are often analyzed through fiduciary duty, strategic oversight, presidential evaluation, and institutional sustainability, less attention has been paid to how board behavior shapes the movement from policy decision to institutional practice. I introduce boardroom drag, epistemic churn, corrected-untruth persistence, accolade governance, business-authority overreach, and the settled-decision ethic to theorize how governance conduct can enable or compromise institutional capacity. Board conduct shapes the institutional environment in which policy is interpreted, trusted, resisted, or carried out. Shared governance also depends on conduct: how actors listen, prepare, represent facts, respect differentiated roles, and honor legitimate processes. Trustee orientation, board assessment, chair training, governance committee practice, and conduct expectations are not internal housekeeping alone. They shape institutional capacity to implement decisions affecting students, faculty, staff, academic programs, research, community partnerships, and public trust. The article advances role-accountable trusteeship as a policy-practice framework for sustaining mission, public trust, and shared governance responsibly over time.

Keywords: higher education governance; shared governance; boards of trustees; policy implementation; institutional capacity; trustee conduct

Introduction: Governance Conduct as an Educational Policy Problem

Educational policy is often imagined as a sequence of formal acts. A policy problem is named, alternatives are considered, a decision is made, and implementation follows. In higher education, however, the movement from policy decision to institutional practice is rarely linear. It depends on the governance conditions through which decisions are interpreted, authorized, resourced, communicated, and enacted. Policies do not implement themselves. They travel through institutional cultures, role relationships, authority structures, fiscal constraints, academic norms, and patterns of trust. For this reason, the conduct of those entrusted with educational governance is not merely procedural or interpersonal. It is a policy-practice condition.

This article examines that condition through the conduct of governing boards in U.S. higher education. Boards are usually analyzed through fiduciary duty, strategic oversight, presidential evaluation, philanthropic responsibility, institutional sustainability, and legal authority. These are indispensable concerns. Yet they do not fully explain how board behavior shapes whether institutional policy decisions become coherent practice. A board may adopt a strategic plan, approve a budget, authorize a reorganization, endorse a shared governance framework, or charge a president with implementing change. But if trustees are underprepared, epistemically careless, resistant to legitimate decisions, informally disparaging of institutional actors, or inclined to treat personal authority as a substitute for institutional learning, they can compromise the conditions required for policy to take effect.

I call this phenomenon boardroom drag: the cumulative slowing, distortion, and weakening of institutional capacity caused by trustee conduct that consumes executive attention, destabilizes trust, displaces mission-centered deliberation, and confuses the boundaries between governance, management, and academic judgment. Boardroom drag is not disagreement. It is not

dissent. It is not the asking of hard questions. Robust boards should challenge assumptions, examine evidence, attend to risk, and refuse easy consensus. Boardroom drag names something different: conduct that prevents governance from becoming disciplined collective judgment and prevents policy from becoming institutional action.

The argument matters for educational policy because board conduct shapes the practical consequences of institutional decisions. Higher education policy is often mediated by boards through budget decisions, program approvals, personnel structures, presidential authority, accreditation obligations, faculty governance, enrollment strategy, student success priorities, and public accountability. When boards govern with preparation, accuracy, role clarity, institutional humility, and respect for legitimate decision processes, they help create the policy infrastructure through which institutions can act. When they do not, they produce policy friction. Decisions remain unsettled. Leaders must repeatedly correct information rather than implement plans. Staff and faculty receive mixed signals about authority. Strategic priorities lose coherence. The institution spends capacity managing governance behavior rather than serving students, faculty, staff, communities, and mission.

This conceptual article advances six analytic concepts for understanding these dynamics: boardroom drag, epistemic churn, corrected-untruth persistence, accolade governance, business-authority overreach, and the settled-decision ethic. Together, these concepts make visible a form of educational policy failure that is often experienced but undernamed. The article then proposes role-accountable trusteeship as a policy-practice framework for strengthening board conduct, shared governance, institutional capacity, and mission accountability. The goal is not to weaken boards. It is to strengthen trusteeship by treating preparation, accuracy, humility, and decision discipline as fiduciary and policy responsibilities.

Educational Policy, Implementation, and Institutional Capacity

Educational policy is especially attentive to the relationship between policy and practice: how decisions produce consequences, how institutional actors interpret policy, and how formal authority becomes lived educational reality. The policy implementation literature has long shown that implementation is not a technical afterthought. Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) famously described implementation as the difficult work of connecting intentions to outcomes across multiple decision points. McDonnell and Elmore (1987) examined how policy instruments shape action by altering incentives, capacity, mandates, and inducements. Honig (2006) argued that contemporary education policy implementation requires attention to complexity, organizational context, and the people through whom policy is enacted. Spillane et al. (2002) further showed that policy is interpreted through cognition, sensemaking, and situated practice. In short, policy becomes practice through human interpretation and organizational conditions.

Although much implementation scholarship has focused on K-12 systems, its insights are deeply relevant to higher education. Colleges and universities are complex organizations in which authority is differentiated across boards, presidents, faculty, staff, students, accreditors, donors, public agencies, and professional communities. Higher education governance scholarship has long examined the interplay among board authority, presidential leadership, faculty governance, organizational culture, and institutional change (Birnbaum, 1988; Chait et al., 2005; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Minor, 2004; Tierney, 2008; Trower, 2013). Shared governance is not a ceremonial feature of this complexity; it is part of the institutional architecture through which educational policy is deliberated, legitimized, and implemented. The 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities, jointly formulated by the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing

Boards of Universities and Colleges, recognizes that boards, administrations, and faculties hold distinct but interdependent responsibilities for institutional welfare (American Association of University Professors et al., 1966/1990). When those responsibilities are understood and respected, shared governance can connect policy authority to academic judgment and institutional legitimacy. When they are blurred, bypassed, or treated as obstacles, policy implementation becomes fragile.

The board's role in this ecology is significant because trustees hold ultimate fiduciary authority. Boards approve budgets, appoint and evaluate presidents, authorize institutional strategy, oversee risk, steward mission, and protect institutional sustainability. Their authority gives them power not only over decisions but also over the conditions in which decisions are enacted. A board that sends coherent signals about authority, mission, evidence, and decision finality strengthens implementation capacity. A board that sends contradictory signals can undermine even well-designed policy.

This article therefore treats trustee conduct as a policy variable. That claim may seem unusual because conduct is often framed as temperament, meeting style, etiquette, or board culture. Yet conduct affects policy in concrete ways. It shapes what information is trusted, whose expertise is recognized, how disagreement is handled, whether institutional actors believe decisions will hold, and whether leaders can move from deliberation to implementation. These are not soft matters. They are conditions of policy enactment.

The conceptual shift is important. If board conduct is only a matter of interpersonal style, then poor conduct can be tolerated as the cost of volunteer governance or explained away as passion, independence, or candor. If board conduct is a policy-practice condition, then poor conduct must be understood as consequential to educational outcomes. It can delay academic

change, weaken student success initiatives, unsettle faculty trust, consume scarce leadership capacity, and distort institutional priorities. Educational policy scholarship needs language for this level of governance consequence.

Boardroom Drag: When Governance Conduct Becomes Policy Friction

Boardroom drag describes the institutional friction produced when trustee conduct slows, distorts, or weakens the movement from policy decision to practice. The concept is useful because harmful governance conduct often does not present as open crisis. It accumulates quietly. Meetings become remedial rather than strategic. Senior leaders spend time re-explaining information already provided. Trustees relitigate decisions after legitimate processes have occurred. Staff become cautious about implementation because they are unsure whether board support is stable. Presidents must manage board behavior while also managing finance, enrollment, accreditation, academic quality, labor relations, student needs, public accountability, and institutional change.

The first source of boardroom drag is unprepared trusteeship. Boards cannot govern well when members have not read materials, studied financial information, reviewed prior decisions, or understood the matter before them. Unpreparedness converts deliberation into orientation. Instead of using meeting time to test assumptions and exercise judgment, the board uses it to catch up. Prepared trustees are pulled backward, institutional leaders repeat what has already been documented, and the agenda narrows. This is not merely inefficient. It is a breach of fiduciary discipline because the duty of care requires informed participation, not symbolic attendance (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges [AGB], 2015, 2025).

A second source of boardroom drag is deliberative congestion. Deliberative congestion occurs when individual trustees occupy disproportionate airtime, repeat points already made,

redirect discussion toward personal experience, or use governance meetings for self-display rather than collective inquiry. Such behavior may appear engaged, but it can narrow the board's intellectual range. Quieter trustees are crowded out. The chair's ability to steward the agenda is weakened. Leaders become forced to manage personalities rather than advance institutional analysis. The boardroom is a scarce institutional resource; using that resource responsibly is part of trusteeship.

A third source is role confusion. Trustees govern collectively through board authority; they do not individually supervise staff, direct operations, manage faculty work, or substitute personal preference for delegated executive authority. When individual trustees create informal channels of influence, criticize staff outside appropriate supervisory structures, or imply that administrative decisions require their personal consent, the institution receives mixed signals about authority. In policy terms, implementation becomes unstable because the institutional actor charged with implementation no longer appears to hold settled authority.

Boardroom drag is especially costly during institutional change. Change already requires sensemaking, communication, trust-building, resource alignment, and disciplined implementation. Contemporary presidents navigate intensifying pressures related to finance, public accountability, student needs, political scrutiny, and institutional change (Melidona et al., 2023). When board behavior adds uncertainty, the institution's adaptive capacity is reduced. Presidents and senior leaders then face a double implementation burden: they must carry out the policy decision and repair the governance conditions that should have supported it. Over time, such uncertainty can also encourage organizational silence, as staff and leaders become less willing to surface concerns in environments where speech feels risky or unstable (Morrison &

Milliken, 2000). The result is not simply frustration. It is policy failure through governance friction.

Epistemic Churn and the Knowledge Conditions of Policy Implementation

Educational policy depends on knowledge. Policy scholars have shown that policy is not simply adopted and applied; it is interpreted, mediated, and enacted through the professional communities and organizational settings that give it meaning (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001). Boards deliberate about finances, enrollment, accreditation, academic quality, student outcomes, labor costs, legal obligations, fundraising, program viability, and strategic risk. These matters require factual grounding. Disagreement over interpretation is expected and often valuable. Disagreement over values may be unavoidable. But governance becomes corrosive when factual correction does not settle factual claims.

I call this epistemic churn: the recurring cycle in which institutional leaders must repeatedly correct, restate, or reestablish facts that have already been clarified. Epistemic churn emerges when inaccurate claims continue to circulate after correction, when anecdote is treated as evidence, when suspicion is treated as knowledge, or when a trustee's preferred narrative remains available despite documentation to the contrary. In policy implementation terms, epistemic churn prevents movement from information to judgment. The institution cannot ask, 'Given what we know, what should we do?' because it must keep asking, 'Can we agree on what is true?'

This problem is more than informational. It is organizational. Sensemaking scholarship shows that institutions act through shared interpretations of ambiguous environments (Weick, 1995). Organizational learning requires the ability to surface error, correct assumptions, and integrate new knowledge into future action (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Edmondson, 1999). Policy

implementation likewise depends on how actors interpret policy signals, evidence, and expectations (Spillane et al., 2002). When corrected claims remain in circulation, the board's knowledge environment becomes unstable. The institution is held in repetitive clarification rather than adaptive movement.

Epistemic churn also carries reputational consequences because trustees do not speak as ordinary observers. Their words carry institutional weight. A trustee who repeats an inaccurate claim about finances, accreditation, staff performance, faculty governance, presidential action, or student outcomes can alter perceptions even when the claim is later corrected. Correction may not travel as far as the initial statement. The authority of trusteeship gives informal speech institutional force.

For this reason, boards require epistemic responsibility. Epistemic responsibility is the obligation to seek, receive, use, and correct information in ways consistent with fiduciary duty and policy accountability. It requires trustees to distinguish question from accusation, concern from conclusion, uncertainty from fact, and evidence from impression. It also requires trustees to stop circulating claims once those claims have been credibly corrected. Without epistemic responsibility, boards can unintentionally become producers of misinformation within the very institutions they are charged to steward.

Corrected-Untruth Persistence and Information Integrity

Corrected-untruth persistence is a specific form of epistemic churn. It occurs when a trustee continues to state, imply, or circulate a claim after accurate information has been provided. The term is intentionally precise because institutions often lack language for this behavior. They may call it confusion, concern, misunderstanding, disagreement, or a difference

of perspective. Sometimes it is. But when correction has occurred and the claim continues, the issue is no longer simply misunderstanding. It is a failure of epistemic discipline.

Corrected-untruth persistence compromises educational policy in at least four ways. First, it destabilizes the board's knowledge base. Boards make decisions through collective reliance on shared information. If corrected claims remain socially available, the board's deliberative foundation becomes unstable. Second, it burdens institutional leaders. Presidents and senior staff must repeatedly re-document what has already been established. This consumes attention that should be directed toward implementation, strategy, students, faculty, staff, and mission. Third, it damages trust. When leaders correct inaccuracies and those corrections do not hold, they may reasonably conclude that evidence is not the central issue. Fourth, it can produce institutional harm. Repeated inaccuracies about institutional decisions, finances, academic quality, personnel structures, or student outcomes can affect morale, donor confidence, faculty trust, staff retention, and public perception.

Corrected-untruth persistence is particularly dangerous in higher education because governance authority is dispersed and symbolic. A claim repeated by a trustee may influence other trustees, alumni, donors, faculty, staff, or community partners. It may also distort the policy narrative surrounding an institutional decision. For example, a budgetary decision may be framed as ideological rather than financial, a restructuring may be framed as arbitrary rather than strategic, or a delegated administrative action may be framed as unauthorized despite clear board action. Once such narratives circulate, implementation must contend not only with the decision itself but also with the governance story attached to it.

Boards therefore need accuracy protocols. When factual inaccuracies arise, corrections should be documented clearly. Board or committee chairs should close the loop by naming what

has been corrected and what the record now reflects. If a trustee continues to circulate the corrected claim, the governance committee should treat the matter as a conduct issue. This is not punishment. It is institutional answerability. A board cannot protect public trust if it cannot protect the integrity of its own knowledge environment.

Accolade Governance and the Limits of Status-Based Authority

Accolade governance occurs when trustees use personal accomplishment, professional distinction, philanthropic status, institutional affiliation, public recognition, or career success as implicit warrants for governance authority. In accolade governance, the trustee's biography becomes the argument. The trustee does not merely contribute expertise; the trustee centers status as evidence that their view should prevail.

Higher education boards benefit from accomplished trustees. Institutions need trustees with expertise in finance, law, public policy, philanthropy, education, community leadership, organizational strategy, technology, and civic life. The problem is not accomplishment. The problem is when accomplishment substitutes for institutional learning. A trustee may have led a business, managed significant assets, chaired a foundation, built a public profile, or achieved professional recognition and still need to learn the institution's mission, student population, academic structures, faculty role, accreditation environment, labor conditions, community obligations, and governance history.

Accolade governance is tempting because many trustees are recruited precisely because of distinction elsewhere. Yet expertise is contextual. A policy solution that appears obvious from one professional standpoint may be inappropriate when considered through academic freedom, shared governance, student formation, program accreditation, nonprofit mission, community accountability, or developmental knowledge. In policy terms, accolade governance narrows

problem definition. Bacchi (2009) reminds policy analysts to ask what the problem is represented to be. Trustees who rely too heavily on personal authority may represent complex educational problems as familiar problems from their own domains. Enrollment becomes sales. Academic programs become products. Faculty become cost centers. Students become customers. Mission becomes brand. Such representations can produce practical consequences that erode educational purpose.

The antidote is fiduciary humility. Fiduciary humility does not ask trustees to minimize their expertise. It asks them to place expertise in service of the institution rather than above it. It requires trustees to say, in effect: I bring knowledge, but I must also learn; I have experience, but this institution has history; I have judgment, but others have expertise; I hold authority, but that authority is collective, fiduciary, and mission-bound. Fiduciary humility is therefore not a personal virtue alone. It is a policy discipline because it shapes how problems are framed, whose knowledge counts, and what actions become possible.

Business-Authority Overreach and the Misrecognition of Educational Institutions

Business-authority overreach is related to accolade governance but deserves separate attention. It occurs when business experience or market logic is treated as superior to, rather than complementary with, educational, academic, developmental, professional, scholarly, or community-based knowledge. Higher education institutions need business discipline. They need sustainable budgets, risk management, operational clarity, enrollment strategy, technological capacity, facilities planning, investment oversight, and philanthropic infrastructure. Boards with financial and business expertise can be enormously valuable, especially during periods of fiscal pressure. But colleges and universities are not simply businesses with classrooms. They are

mission-bearing educational institutions accountable to students, faculty, staff, communities, disciplines, accreditors, donors, public agencies, and society.

Business-authority overreach flattens this complexity. It can make efficiency appear synonymous with effectiveness, speed appear synonymous with leadership, revenue appear synonymous with value, and market demand appear synonymous with mission. It can also create impatience with shared governance, academic deliberation, and the slower relational work required for educational trust. The danger is not business expertise. The danger is totalizing business expertise.

This distinction is crucial for educational policy. Many contemporary higher education institutions face real financial stress, demographic change, public skepticism, and competitive pressure. It would be irresponsible to dismiss financial sustainability as secondary to mission. Financial sustainability matters because mission matters. But when market logics become the only authorized language of governance, policy alternatives narrow. Programs that serve public purpose may appear inefficient. Faculty consultation may appear slow rather than legitimate. Student supports may appear as costs rather than conditions of educational access. Community commitments may appear peripheral rather than central to institutional identity.

Shared governance helps counter this narrowing by insisting that institutional decisions require multiple domains of knowledge. Boards bring fiduciary oversight; presidents and administrators bring executive responsibility; faculty bring academic judgment; staff bring operational and student-facing expertise; students and communities bring lived knowledge of educational consequences. Policy practice in higher education is strongest when these forms of knowledge are brought into disciplined relationship rather than ranked according to market authority. Business acumen must be governed by mission, not the other way around.

The Unsettled-Decision Regime and the Failure of Implementation Capacity

A further source of boardroom drag emerges when decisions remain socially unsettled after they have been legitimately made. I call this the unsettled-decision regime. In this regime, a board may vote, a committee may recommend, a president may decide within delegated authority, or a strategic direction may be approved, but individual trustees continue to reopen the matter through repeated questioning, informal commentary, public skepticism, or side conversations. The formal decision exists, but the governance environment continues to signal uncertainty.

The unsettled-decision regime is a policy implementation failure. Implementation requires authority, sequence, communication, and trust. Institutional actors need to know whether a decision is real enough to act upon. Staff need to proceed with operational steps. Faculty need to understand consultation boundaries and academic implications. Presidents and senior leaders need to communicate direction. Donors and external partners need coherent signals. When trustees continue to unsettle decisions after legitimate processes have occurred, the institution cannot move with confidence.

This argument does not diminish dissent. Dissent before decision is essential. Trustees should ask difficult questions, request evidence, register concerns, test alternatives, and refuse premature consensus. Boards that suppress dissent in the name of efficiency are weak boards. But after appropriate deliberation and legitimate decision-making, trustees have a responsibility to respect the decision's institutional standing. That responsibility does not require private agreement. It requires public discipline.

The settled-decision ethic offers an alternative. A settled-decision ethic is the governance norm that decisions made through legitimate processes should be supported, or at minimum not

undermined, during implementation. It clarifies when debate is open, how dissent is recorded, who has authority to decide, what constitutes new evidence, and under what conditions a matter may be reopened. Trustees retain the right to monitor implementation, ask whether assumptions are holding, and evaluate outcomes. But monitoring is not the same as reopening. Accountability is not the same as destabilization.

The settled-decision ethic is especially important in higher education because institutional change often requires sustained implementation across academic years, budget cycles, accreditation timelines, faculty processes, and student cohorts. If decisions cannot remain settled long enough to be implemented, institutions become trapped in perpetual pre-implementation. They appear to be governing, but they are repeatedly returning to the same threshold. In policy terms, the decision process consumes the implementation process.

Why Boards Struggle to Address Boardroom Drag

If boardroom drag is costly, why do institutions tolerate it? Several obstacles make trustee conduct difficult to address. The first is status insulation. Trustees may have wealth, professional prestige, donor influence, political connections, longevity, or social standing. Their behavior may therefore be excused as passion, candor, commitment, or independence. Board chairs may hesitate to intervene. Other trustees may privately object but publicly remain silent. Presidents may absorb the cost because directly challenging a trustee can create political risk.

The second obstacle is politeness without accountability. Boards often value collegiality, and rightly so. But collegiality can become avoidance. A board may preserve surface harmony while allowing corrosive patterns to continue. This produces deceptive calm: the board appears civil because no one names the problem, while institutional actors experience the behavior as

destabilizing. The silence surrounding trustee conduct then becomes part of the institution's policy environment.

The third obstacle is fiduciary misrecognition. Trustees may believe they are fulfilling fiduciary duty by asking repeated questions, resisting decisions, or challenging institutional leaders. Sometimes they are. But fiduciary duty also requires preparation, accuracy, role clarity, loyalty to institutional mission, and respect for legitimate process. When trustees confuse disruption with diligence, accountability may feel like silencing. This is why boards need explicit conduct expectations that distinguish robust oversight from governance behavior that undermines implementation.

The fourth obstacle is the absence of conduct architecture. Many boards have bylaws, committee charters, conflict-of-interest policies, confidentiality agreements, and fiduciary statements. Fewer have explicit expectations regarding preparation, use of deliberative time, correction of inaccuracies, staff communication boundaries, respect for decision finality, and consequences for repeated conduct concerns. Without conduct architecture, boards rely too heavily on personality, tradition, and informal norms.

The fifth obstacle is ambiguity about who governs the governors. Presidents are accountable to boards. Staff are accountable through administrative structures. Faculty are accountable through academic and peer processes. But trustees are often accountable primarily to one another. This makes board self-discipline essential. If the board chair, governance committee, and executive committee do not address trustee conduct, the institution has few remedies that do not escalate into crisis.

Role-Accountable Trusteeship as Educational Policy Practice

The solution to boardroom drag is not weaker boards. It is stronger trusteeship. Professional guidance on trusteeship emphasizes that effective board service requires attention to fiduciary role, preparation, institutional loyalty, and collective responsibility (AGB, 2021). I propose role-accountable trusteeship as a framework for addressing boardroom drag and strengthening educational policy practice in higher education. Role-accountable trusteeship means that trustees are accountable not only for votes and decisions, but also for the conduct through which governance occurs. It recognizes that fiduciary responsibility is enacted through preparation, speech, listening, accuracy, restraint, humility, and respect for institutional process.

First, boards should adopt a preparation covenant. Trustees should be expected to read materials, review financial and strategic documents, understand prior decisions, submit clarifying questions in advance when possible, and arrive ready for deliberation. Repeated lack of preparation should be addressed as a duty-of-care concern. A preparation covenant makes explicit that board service requires labor, not merely presence.

Second, boards should establish deliberative norms. These norms should clarify expectations regarding time use, repetition, relevance, evidence, confidentiality, and respect for collective participation. Board chairs should be empowered to redirect discussion when comments become duplicative, self-referential, or disconnected from the decision before the board. Deliberative norms protect the board's capacity for collective judgment.

Third, boards should create an accuracy protocol. When inaccurate claims arise, corrections should be documented clearly. Trustees should be expected not to repeat corrected inaccuracies. Persistent corrected-untruth circulation should be referred to the governance

committee as a conduct matter. An accuracy protocol treats information integrity as a fiduciary responsibility rather than a matter of personal preference.

Fourth, boards should clarify communication boundaries. Trustees should understand that concerns about staff performance, implementation, or operational execution generally belong with the president, board chair, committee chair, or established supervisory process. Trustees should not create informal channels of staff evaluation or shadow supervision. Clear boundaries protect institutional authority and staff trust.

Fifth, boards should practice fiduciary humility through orientation and continuing education. Trustee education should address the distinctive nature of higher education institutions, including academic freedom, shared governance, accreditation, student success, faculty work, research, community obligations, nonprofit finance, and public purpose. Trustees should be invited to bring expertise without presuming that expertise from another sector automatically resolves educational complexity.

Sixth, boards should adopt a settled-decision ethic. Decision-making processes should clarify when debate is open, how dissent is recorded, when decisions are final, and how implementation will be supported. Trustees should be expected not to undermine decisions made through legitimate authority. This ethic protects institutions from endless relitigation while preserving genuine oversight.

Seventh, boards should assess governance culture regularly. Board self-assessment should examine not only attendance, giving, committee participation, and strategic progress, but also preparation, conduct, trust, role clarity, information integrity, deliberative quality, and respect for institutional actors. Assessment should ask whether the board's conduct strengthens or weakens the institution's capacity to implement policy.

These practices do not eliminate disagreement. They make disagreement more useful. They help boards become places where hard questions can be asked without destabilizing facts, roles, or legitimate decisions. Role-accountable trusteeship therefore links governance culture to policy practice. It treats board behavior as part of the institutional infrastructure through which educational decisions become consequential action.

Implications for Educational Policy, Board Leadership, and Institutional Accountability

The argument has implications for educational policy scholarship. First, it suggests that higher education policy analysis should attend more closely to governance conduct as an implementation condition. Formal policy structures matter, but so do the behaviors through which authority is enacted. Board conduct shapes the institutional environment in which policy is interpreted, trusted, resisted, or carried out.

Second, the argument expands how shared governance is understood. Shared governance is often discussed as a structure of consultation and authority among boards, administrations, and faculties. That structural understanding is necessary but insufficient. Shared governance also depends on conduct: how actors listen, prepare, represent facts, respect differentiated roles, and honor legitimate processes. A board can formally endorse shared governance while behaviorally weakening it. Conversely, a board can strengthen shared governance by modeling disciplined inquiry, role clarity, and respect for expertise.

Third, the argument reframes board development as educational policy work. Trustee orientation, board assessment, chair training, governance committee practice, and conduct expectations are not internal housekeeping alone. They shape institutional capacity to implement decisions affecting students, faculty, staff, academic programs, research, community

partnerships, and public trust. Governance development is therefore a lever of policy implementation.

For presidents, the framework offers language for documenting patterns without personalizing them. A president can help the board chair see how certain behaviors affect institutional capacity: repeated correction of inaccuracies, delayed implementation, staff reluctance to engage, committee confusion, or erosion of trust. The strongest presidential response is not defensiveness. It is institutional analysis that connects conduct to mission and policy consequence.

For board chairs, the framework underscores the cultural dimension of the chair role. Chairs must protect the agenda, invite multiple voices, interrupt repetition, clarify decisions, and follow up privately when individual trustees compromise deliberative quality. The chair's work is not merely procedural. It is policy stewardship because it shapes whether the board can convert information into judgment and judgment into implementation.

For governance committees, the framework makes trustee conduct a legitimate domain of board effectiveness. Committees should ensure that trustee expectations are explicit, orientation is meaningful, board self-assessment includes conduct, and accountability mechanisms exist. They should also treat repeated conduct concerns as governance concerns, not awkward interpersonal matters outside policy.

For educational policy researchers, the framework opens new questions. How do boards mediate policy implementation in higher education? How do trustees interpret academic, financial, and public accountability problems? How do board chairs manage factual instability or decision relitigation? How do presidents experience board conduct as either implementation support or policy friction? How do governance norms affect institutional capacity during fiscal

stress, political pressure, or academic change? These questions connect higher education governance to broader education policy debates about implementation, authority, expertise, and practice.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions do not evolve through policy decisions alone. They evolve through the governance conditions that allow decisions to become institutional practice. Boardroom drag names the institutional cost of trustee conduct that consumes capacity, weakens trust, displaces mission-centered deliberation, and destabilizes legitimate authority. Epistemic churn names the repeated factual instability that prevents boards from moving from information to judgment. Corrected-untruth persistence names the governance failure that occurs when inaccurate claims continue after correction. Accolade governance names the substitution of personal distinction for institutional learning. Business-authority overreach names the totalizing use of market logic in educational institutions whose purposes exceed market analogy. The settled-decision ethic names the discipline required for institutions to move from deliberation to action.

Together, these concepts make visible a central claim: boards do not only govern through decisions. They govern through conduct. Preparation is fiduciary. Accuracy is fiduciary. Role clarity is fiduciary. Respectful deliberation is fiduciary. Institutional humility is fiduciary. Decision integrity is fiduciary. Each is also a policy-practice condition because each shapes whether institutional decisions can be implemented responsibly.

Educational policy scholarship is concerned with the practical consequences of decisions and alternatives. Trustee conduct belongs in that conversation. When governing boards create conditions of trust, accuracy, role discipline, and decision integrity, they strengthen institutional

capacity to serve students, faculty, staff, communities, and the public good. When boards mistake self-display for stewardship, disruption for diligence, or external accomplishment for institutional wisdom, they compromise that capacity. The challenge is not to silence dissent or protect leaders from scrutiny. The challenge is to build governance cultures where hard questions are welcomed, evidence matters, roles are respected, decisions can settle, and mission remains the center of collective responsibility. In that sense, role-accountable trusteeship is not only a practice of board effectiveness. It is a condition of educational policy becoming educational possibility.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed for this conceptual article. The sources discussed are cited in the text and reference list.

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