



What Every Student Trustee Needs to Know to Lead with Confidence

A new handbook helps student trustees make the most of their board service.

MANY BOARD MEMBERS — PROBABLY MOST — underestimate the many ways by which serving on the board of a public college can be challenging. Trustees new to board service may feel out of place and intimidated by the rules of parliamentary procedure. Those who think carefully about their oaths of office may realize suddenly how much personal responsibility they have accepted by joining a board. All board members must learn how local laws affect their work, understand their own roles and responsibilities and how they differ from those of the college CEO, and so much more.

Trustees typically serve multi-year terms and have some time to learn and grow in their roles. Student trustees, however, usually only have one year to accomplish everything above while simultaneously doing their coursework and meeting other obligations. It's a *lot* to expect of anyone.

About a decade ago, ACCT established the Student Trustee Advisory Committee (STAC) to encourage student members' education and development through greater engagement with the association and their peers. Under the guidance of former ACCT Board Member and Northern Virginia Community College Trustee Rosie O'Neil and ACCT Executive Coordinator to the Board of Directors Karen Lomax, the STAC has lived up to its original design and then some. Several years ago, Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society CEO Lynn Tincher-Ladner became the group's primary educator and mentor, leading STAC meetings at the annual Community College National Legislative Summit and ACCT Leadership Congress.

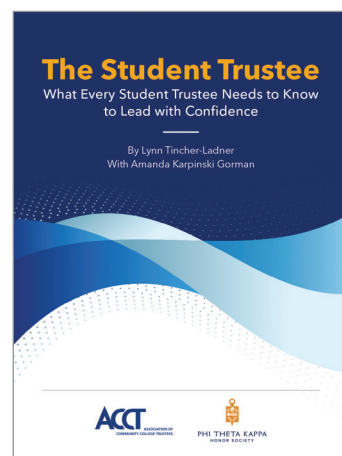
Now, Tincher-Ladner and former student trustee

Amanda Karpinski Gorman have written a new handbook for student trustees to encourage and equip them to be the best board members they can.

"This handbook is meant to supplement the guidance and training you receive from your college president and board," the authors say to student trustees in the book's foreword. "We hope it will serve as a practical resource — helping you understand the responsibilities of board service, your unique role as a student trustee, and how to make a meaningful impact through leadership and advocacy in your college and beyond."

The book is divided into four parts: the foundations of student leadership, how to serve effectively on the board, understanding issues that matter to students, and student trustees' role *beyond* the board table.

Included in the first section is information that often goes unexplained — for example, advice for student trustees about how to connect with peers and make the best of those connections, how to dress for board meetings, how to communicate like a leader, and tips for professional communications. The section also outlines what student trustees should expect during their first 30 days on the board (see next page).



SAMPLE FIRST 30-DAY CHECKLIST

- ☐ **Meet with the Board Chair and College President**
Introduce yourself and ask how you can be most helpful. These early conversations set the tone and give insights into leadership expectations. Be curious, listen more than you talk, and take notes.
- ☐ **Schedule Time with Your Board Liaison** The board liaison is typically a staff member who works in the college president's or chancellor's office and serves as the main point of contact between board members and the college. They help with logistics, scheduling, and making sure you have what you need to participate effectively. Ask them to walk you through:
 - Where and when board meetings are held.
 - How to access meeting materials and agendas.
 - Expectations for attendance, dress code, and communication.
 - How and when you'll receive information.
- ☐ **Review Recent Board Agendas and Minutes**
This will help you get a sense of what the board has been working on, what issues are ongoing, and how discussions typically unfold.
- ☐ **Learn Your College's Strategic Plan**
This document outlines the college's mission, vision, goals, and priorities. Understanding it will help you connect board discussions to student needs.
- ☐ **Observe and Learn at Your First Board Meeting**
Don't feel pressured to speak up right away. Watch how trustees interact, how motions are made and voted on, and how the board handles tough topics. Bring a notebook and jot down your observations and questions.
- ☐ **Set Personal Goals for Your Term**
Think about what you want to accomplish as a student trustee. Do you want to improve communication between students and the board? Raise awareness about an overlooked issue? Strengthen your leadership skills? Setting a few clear goals will help guide your focus throughout the year.
- ☐ **Attend Campus Events and Talk to Students**
Start connecting now. The best trustees are grounded in student realities. Introduce yourself at events, club meetings, or even in class. Ask the three student-centered questions from earlier in the manual.

Your first 30 days are all about orientation. Don't worry about having big ideas or bold initiatives right away. Focus on listening, learning how the board operates, and understanding the student experience at your college. You'll find your voice – and your impact – will grow as your confidence and context grow.

The Student Trustee Handbook concludes with an emphasis on advocacy — how student trustees can and should advocate for their colleges while serving on their boards and beyond, as well as lessons student board members can take with them once their board service has ended.

Serving Effectively on the Board

Most people who read this magazine know how deceptively complicated serving on a board can be. *The Student Trustee Handbook* begins with an explanation of the board's role in setting policy versus college operations. The authors write, "As a student, your experience with the college is often shaped by what you see and feel on the ground — classes, services, student life, financial aid, advising. This outward-facing perspective is incredibly valuable, but it can also make it more challenging to understand your new role as a trustee. Trustees are not involved in the day-to-day operations of the college. They don't manage staff, set class schedules, or resolve individual complaints. Instead, trustees focus on the big picture: long-term planning, institutional policies, financial oversight, and ensuring the college fulfills its mission." They go on to explain how the board functions as a single unit, what accountability means, ways to avoid conflicts of interest, and the importance of maintaining confidentiality.

This section also helps students understand how they can build influence and relationships as a peer, how to navigate tough conversations and disagree respectfully, the significance of the college's mission and plan, and the basics of parliamentary procedure.

Understanding Issues that Matter to Students

Most student trustees are ambitious, engaged in their communities, and motivated to succeed in college and to serve. There's no doubt that

they understand what they know matters. In this section, the authors share information that they may not already know — for students' own benefit as well as for the benefit of their board service. For example, while students understand that their colleges are educational institutions, they may not always conceive of community college as a business sector or understand the significance of that to their board service. In this section, the authors recommend sources of news, information, and research about community colleges that can help students understand their institutions in a broader context.

This section also discusses policies that affect students, what drives student success, and what trustees need to know about paying for college.

Beyond the Board Table

The Student Trustee Handbook concludes with an emphasis on advocacy — how student trustees can and should advocate for their colleges while serving on their boards and beyond, as well as lessons student board members can take with them once their board service has ended. Reminding student trustees that "serving on a board of trustees is executive-level experience — something few students have," the authors offer ways that students can leverage these experiences to serve them in their ongoing academic, career, and life journeys.

The Student Trustee Handbook will be available through the Member Portal & Online Shop at www.acct.org this fall.

Governance (Board's Role)	Operations (Staff's Role)
Approves the college's mission and strategic plan	Carries out the strategic plan day to day
Sets or approves board-level policies	Develops and implements administrative policies
Hires, evaluates, and supports the college CEO	Manages employees, departments, and programs
Oversees the college's financial health	Manages budgets, purchasing, and expenditures
Monitors student success data and asks questions	Runs programs that support student success
Advocates for students through big-picture leadership	Resolves individual student issues on a case-by-case basis