

Nomination of the Youngstown State University Board of Trustees  
2018-19 AGB John W. Nason Award for Board Leadership

### Introduction

Five years ago, Youngstown State University found itself struggling with financial uncertainty, falling enrollment and frequent changes in presidential leadership. The YSU Board of Trustees provided exemplary, bold and focused direction that resulted in stable leadership and a path forward based on fiscal integrity, shared governance, institutional effectiveness and a new strategic plan.

YSU's leadership team believes that the initiative demonstrated by the Board makes it an excellent candidate for recognition with the Association of Governing Board's John W. Nason Award for Board Leadership.

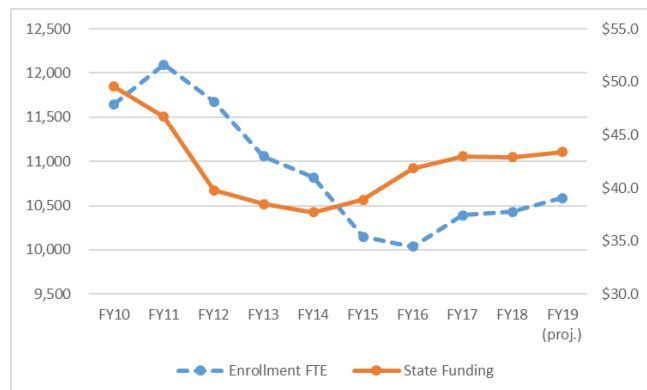
### Background

The trustees at Ohio's public universities are appointed by the governor and serve nine-year terms. The chancellor of the Ohio Department of Higher Education is appointed by the governor and serves on the governor's Cabinet. Despite the challenges of a politically appointed Board, the YSU BOT has acted to assure the quality, distinction and, most importantly, the sustainability of a comprehensive public university that is a beacon for educational attainment and an anchor institution for the region and beyond.

### From an Uncertain Future...

In 2013, the YSU BOT found itself in a dilemma: a leadership vacuum was diminishing the ability of the institution to create a sustainable future exactly when higher education was battling public perceptions of its relevance and value. One YSU president served for 10 years with great accomplishment. This period was followed by a challenging five years of leadership instability. The next president served for three years during which the current strategic plan was created. The following president was recruited through a national search process but left the university after only eight months.

Over this period of time, enrollment fell by 17%, despite the fact that YSU's tuition was lower than other Ohio public universities. Due to frequent changes in leadership, previously-developed relationships with the community became increasingly uncertain. The imperative for YSU to be an anchor institution contributing to the success of the region was also diminished.



At the same time, the state of Ohio reduced funding appropriations by 15 percent, compounding the perfect financial storm. In addition, when institutions were increasingly anticipating significant revenue through the fundraising efforts of their Foundations, the

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relationship between the YSU BOT and the YSU Foundation BOT became strained. Of great BOT concern was the fact that a structural budget deficit was also slowly building. In addition, these cumulative circumstances would not be conducive to high marks for the upcoming reaccreditation process. Clearly, the university was facing critical challenges that required bold leadership.

Under such circumstances, the BOT turned its focus firmly on attracting a president with the insights, instincts and personal attributes necessary to regain the respect and support of communities both within and outside of the institution.

While many universities across the country were planning for their future, a “perfect storm” had impacted YSU and the Mahoning Valley. The members of the BOT were uniformly adamant that they would lead the search for and support the vision of the next president, ensuring sustained, successful leadership and contributions to the prosperity of the region.

### **To a Future of Possibilities...**

Despite well-known challenges in higher education and at YSU, the applicant pool for president included well-qualified candidates. From that group, the BOT selected an experienced, yet unconventional individual for president, James P. Tressel. President Tressel was known mostly as a successful NCAA football coach, but he had more recently gained important higher education experience as the executive vice president for student success at the University of Akron. The BOT’s bold action in hiring Mr. Tressel as president is paramount to this nomination.

To help stabilize and position YSU for a future of possibilities, the newly-appointed president embarked on campus-wide listening sessions and gathered input from community leaders and others. As a result, the BOT recognized there needed to be improvements to the physical environment, particularly the interface with the city of Youngstown and the gateways to campus; enhancements to advance the university’s brand by investing in an integrated and renewed marketing and brand strategy; a redesign of the scholarship program so more deserving students with financial need were supported to attend YSU; transformation from an honors program to a robust Honors College; and making faculty and staff compensation a priority, if possible, eliminating the perennial issue of compensation being residually budgeted. These priorities, among other BOT-initiated concerns, became the focus of institutional actions needed to stabilize and to create a more certain future for the university. The BOT’s impact can be illustrated through its decision-making and support of recommended actions in the categories that follow.

### **Fiscal integrity**

The BOT mandated that the administration work with the campus community to resolve a \$10 million structural deficit. Previously, even when such a deficit existed, the employees

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represented by the unions benefited from modest increases in salary and benefits. Under these circumstances, the BOT-endorsed negotiations that required a larger employee contribution to health insurance. The employee compensation contribution went from less than 5 percent to 15 percent, reducing the university's health care costs by a cumulative \$7.5 million.

In addition, knowing that fundraising must become an increased component of financial support, the BOT directed the administration to work with the YSU Foundation to assure a new partnership that would respect the Foundation's independence, yet be responsive to the growing needs of the university and its challenging financial circumstances. The result of the renewed agreement has, in large part, resulted in the \$100 million "We See Tomorrow" fundraising campaign, the largest in the university's history. To date, nearly \$85 million has been raised, with the goal expected to be reached by the end of 2019. In addition, the BOT endorsed a redesign of the scholarship strategy for student success that includes a distribution of about \$8 million annually (40% of YSU's total scholarship expenditure) from the YSU Foundation.

As a result of these and other such actions, a \$10 million structural deficit in the university's budget was effectively erased by June 2016.

### **Shared Governance**

It was also during this time that the YSU BOT recognized that in order for the University to regain its footing and redeem the trust of the campus community, there needed to be a renewed commitment to shared governance across campus. The BOT created, with the YSU administration, a campus-wide committee, which included one BOT member, to develop a framework for consultative decision-making. The BOT adopted a resolution on shared governance and a document outlining the principles and expectations for practicing a new and integrated decision-making process.

Another outcome of the shared governance priority was the fact that the YSU BOT adjusted its membership structure by creating a seat for the president of the Academic Senate on the BOT's Academic and Student Affairs Committee. This member, along with the student members of the BOT, help assure that student success and academic excellence are the cornerstones of BOT decision-making.

In another expression of openness, while the BOT had typically held its annual Retreat, now called an *Advance*, at a location distant from campus, this year the Advance was held near campus and was made open to the public. The primary topics of the Advance were established by the BOT and are critical to the successful development of an actionable and

The YSU BOT commitment to shared governance is illustrated in the [2017 BOT Resolution in Support of Shared Governance](#). Importantly, a member of the BOT, the provost, and the president of the Academic Senate led the ad hoc committee to create the document that served as the basis for what the BOT eventually approved.

outcomes-oriented new strategic plan. For such a plan to be successfully implemented, the BOT recognized that the practices of shared governance and shared responsibility must be clearly understood and practiced. For this discussion at the Advance, a dean served as the moderator, and the chair of the Academic Senate, president and BOT chairperson developed the Agenda, an outcome from which actions steps will be prioritized and implemented as appropriate. Another innovative aspect of the Advance was the fact the BOT invited university constituents to be involved in various aspects of the meetings.

### **Institutional Effectiveness**

More recently, the BOT has begun to bring a focus on assessing its effectiveness. Members recently self-administered a survey to assess perceptions of effectiveness. The discussion about the results brought to light new perspectives that BOT members will take into consideration as they conduct their business and inform their decisions.

The BOT has proactively demonstrated its awareness that academic excellence and student success represent an institutional effectiveness framework. Knowing that living on or near campus promotes student success, the BOT actively initiated and proactively responded to proposals for public-private relationships to expand the numbers of students who can live on campus. This action resulted in a 45 percent increase in the number of on-campus housing options for students.

Following a change in bylaws, the BOT endorsed an individual to serve as YSU's first National/Global Trustee in September 2018. This individual brings to the BOT experience from other college/university BOT service. The BOT took this definitive step to increase its ability to provide guidance and advice beyond the current members' areas of expertise, particularly in the area of investments in innovation and strategy development.

### **Planning for the Future**

In 2018, the BOT endorsed the president's recommendation to begin a process to update the university's 2020 Strategic Plan, implemented in 2011. In so doing, the Strategic Plan Organization Team (SPOT) was created to plan and support the planning process. While this committee has broad representation and is connected to various institutional constituencies, the BOT is directly connected through two trustees serving on SPOT.

This is a significant demonstration of the BOT's understanding of its leadership role and its commitment to shared governance and responsibility. These two trustees contribute in meaningful ways to the planning process, help assure the plan is grounded in reality, and will champion the plan upon the president's recommendation for BOT endorsement.

The [BOT Case Statement](#) for strategic planning describes the BOT point of view towards the strategic planning process and endorses the creation of a new strategic plan.

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An important contribution to the planning process is a BOT written Case Statement reflecting the essence of shared governance in the planning process and a framework of academic excellence and student success as the planning process unfolds. As a result of the Advance, the BOT will develop a compelling case for the strategic planning activity and will provide guidance to the planning process via BOT resolutions that will occur at the appropriate points in time as the process unfolds.

As the strategic planning process evolves, the BOT will be in a position to endorse proposed optimization of the currently allocated institutional resources. This means the institution must develop a process for academic units and support areas to review the use of current resources and propose a redistribution of current resources for improved effectiveness and efficiency. It has been made clear by the BOT that the optimization process must include a prioritization of academic programs and services. Demonstrated satisfactory outcomes of optimization and prioritization will be the basis upon which the BOT would endorse strategic investment aligned with the goals of the strategic plan. In addition, the BOT indicates that it anticipates an annual optimization and prioritization process to be a component of annual quality enhancement and effectiveness strategies, the outcomes of which align with the Strategic Plan and each proposed budget.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, the Youngstown State University Board of Trustees has provided the exemplary leadership needed to guide an institution through many leadership transitions in a short period of time to a period of leadership stability. Stable leadership was a factor that contributed to reaccreditation of YSU through 2027-28. The BOT has demonstrated the understanding that a clear shared governance and responsibility framework is necessary for it to make the very best decisions possible. The BOT has also worked to improve its effectiveness through reflective assessment strategies, and it is appropriately involved in clarifying expectations of an institutional strategic planning process.

Understanding its responsibility to ensure the sustainable future of Youngstown State University as an anchor institution, the BOT has provided bold and focused direction during a period of leadership transition, enrollment instability and fiscal volatility. Its diligence assuring stable presidential leadership and a commitment to the objectives of shared governance and shared responsibility has created a certain future for Youngstown State University.

In conclusion, BOT actions in recent years demonstrate the foundational resilience of a university that began as a YMCA created to educate immigrants to enrich the community through education 110-years ago.