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Friday, May 5, 2000

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New Center Will Encourage College Board Members to Be 'Active, Not Activist'

By [SARA HEBEL](#)

Washington

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges today formally unveiled a new center aimed at helping state leaders attract and select top-notch trustees and educate board members about how to work effectively with college presidents and lawmakers. The center was immediately attacked by critics as too soft on leadership issues.

The advisory group of the new center will be led by a former state official who is active on higher-education issues: former Gov. Zell Miller of Georgia, a Democrat with a reputation for bipartisanship. Richard Novak, the executive director of the new center, lauded Mr. Miller for how he handled trustee issues as governor. He said the governor had "picked good people" and had given them "the independence to do their jobs."

Besides Mr. Miller, the center's advisory board is replete with some of the most-respected figures in higher education. It includes state and college leaders, as well as the top officials of government and education groups.

The center's leaders say they prize partnerships and coalition-building. They will urge members of governing boards to speak up as groups rather than take on issues as single-minded activists

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with personal agendas. In taking those tacks, the center is positioning itself as a distinct alternative to the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, which has focused on trustee training since 1998.

The council's philosophy is that board members should serve foremost as watchdogs of institutions and protectors of taxpayer dollars. The group's members view states' contributions to higher education as "vast" and urge trustees to carefully monitor how the money is spent. The council provides workshops for state leaders and college trustees, using the forums to urge specific institutional reforms, such as focusing undergraduate academic programs on a common core curriculum and funneling larger percentages of state money for colleges to improve student instruction.

The new center wants trustees to hold institutions more accountable, too, its leaders say. But they also emphasize the role governing boards must play in persuading politicians to value colleges' contributions to each state -- and to honor institutions' importance by providing enough money to support them.

Trustees, the center says, need to serve a balancing role, protecting state interests by ensuring high-quality higher education while weighing institutional needs as colleges work to help meet the broad needs of their states. Compared with the council, "we have a much broader sense of the issues," Mr. Novak said.

In a March speech at the association's annual meeting, as planning for the new center unfolded, Mr. Miller said that it should help states select "level-headed leadership" for boards. "We need to help elected leaders develop clear qualifications and expectations so we can get intelligent and active -- but not activist -- trustees," he said.

His differentiating between "active" and "activist" trustees, and the creation of the new center, raised red flags at the **American Council of Trustees** and **Alumni**. Candace de Russy, a trustee of the State University of New York and a member of the council, argued that board members must be activists who feel a duty to "boldly confront" wasteful spending and bad academic policy.

"If there is a terrible flaw in an institution and a trustee becomes an activist against that, what's the problem with that?" she said.

Responding to the new center's plan to focus on educating trustees, officials at the **American Council of Trustees** and **Alumni** "are already doing it and are doing it better" than the center will, argued Ms. de Russy. "The Association of Governing Boards has been more an advocate for institutions, whereas the council has pushed extremely actively for real higher-education reform."

Jerry L. Martin, president of the council, questioned the center's mission and planned work. He said the governing-board association was focused too much on coalition-building and too little on making needed changes.

"It looks like higher education circling the wagons in defense of the status quo," he said.



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