

AGB Honors Three Leaders for Excellence in Higher Education Governance

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-- The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges ([AGB](#)) is proud to announce that Karen Cook with the [Virginia Tech Foundation](#), Stephanie McNally with [Washington University in St. Louis](#), and Carlos H. García-Alvarado, EdD, with CETYS University, have been selected as recipients of the 2026 AGB Distinguished Board Professional Award. The award recognizes outstanding board professionals whose leadership, innovation, and dedication strengthen governance and advance institutional missions across higher education.



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*Ross A. Mugler, AGB president
and CEO*

The honorees were recognized during the AGB Board Professionals Conference, celebrating their exceptional contributions to governance excellence and trustee engagement. The AGB Distinguished Board Professional Award honors professionals who play a critical role in supporting governing boards. Board professionals ensure that governance processes are strategic, informed, and mission-driven, which enables institutions and foundations to navigate complex challenges and pursue long-term success.

“Board professionals are the backbone of effective governance in higher education,” said Ross A. Mugler, AGB

president and CEO. “Karen, Stephanie, and Carlos exemplify the dedication, creativity, and strategic leadership that enable boards to govern effectively and help institutions thrive. We are proud to recognize their extraordinary contributions. Their leadership demonstrates how thoughtful governance design, strong operational excellence, and innovative engagement strategies can strengthen institutions and help boards navigate an increasingly complex landscape.”

Karen Cook—Virginia Tech Foundation

- Karen Cook has transformed governance operations at the Virginia Tech Foundation, which manages the university's multibillion-dollar endowment and real estate portfolio. Since joining the organization in 2022, Cook has quickly advanced to lead board operations and has implemented a series of innovations that have significantly strengthened director engagement.
- Cook modernized the foundation's board operations by organizing a comprehensive board portal, establishing structured work plans for the board and its committees, and creating an internal operating calendar to improve meeting preparation and coordination across leadership teams.
- Drawing on insights from AGB programming, she also redesigned director orientation into a multiweek, self-paced program; implemented the foundation's first board assessment process; and introduced a formal document outlining director responsibilities and expectations.
- Through her leadership, the foundation's governance processes have evolved into a highly organized and strategic operation, enabling trustees to focus more deeply on mission-driven decision-making and long-term planning.

Stephanie McNally—Washington University in St. Louis

- Stephanie McNally has reimagined how trustees engage with governance at Washington University in St. Louis, transforming board education and engagement through innovative learning-focused approaches.
- She played a central role in the collaborative effort to develop a dynamic trustee orientation course delivered through the university's Canvas learning platform, using a "flipped classroom" model that allows new trustees to explore key governance topics at their own pace before participating in board discussions.
- McNally also helped introduce a Continuing Board Education (CBE) program embedded within board meeting cycles, providing trustees with deeper insights into higher education challenges and opportunities through expert presentations and discussion. These initiatives have transformed board meetings into highly engaging forums for strategic conversation and thought leadership.
- Her work demonstrates how board professionals can serve as educators and change agents, strengthening governance by equipping trustees with the knowledge and context needed to lead effectively.

Carlos H. García-Alvarado—CETYS University

- Carlos García-Alvarado has played a transformative role in strengthening governance at CETYS University, a leading private institution in Mexico with campuses in Mexicali, Tijuana, and Ensenada.
- Working closely with university leadership and board chairs, García-Alvarado helped lead a comprehensive governance transformation that included restructuring the board to improve engagement, strengthening trustee accountability, and aligning committees and agendas with

strategic priorities.

- He also introduced innovative initiatives such as trustee “learning journeys” to leading universities and organizations, bringing trustees together with institutional leaders and experts to explore emerging issues shaping higher education.
- Through these efforts, García-Alvarado has helped elevate CETYS’s governing board from an engaged body to a highly consequential strategic partner in advancing the institution’s long-term vision.

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