



## DR. MARIA LUZ ESPINO

Research Faculty  
Rutgers University

*Candidate, AFA Board of Directors*

Please concisely outline your professional volunteer experience (most recent position first) and any other volunteer experience, both within and outside of the association, that is directly related to association management, board service, or the position for which you are accepting a nomination. Be sure to include both the position held and dates of service.

- American Educational Research Association Latina/o/x Research SIG Chair-Elect (2025-2027)
- Council for the Study of Community Colleges Board Member at Large (2025-2028)
- Omega Nu Alumnae Chapter of Corazones Unidos Siempre, Chi Upsilon Sigma National Latin Sorority Incorporated President (August 2024 - Present)
- National Board Directors of Corazones Unidos Siempre, Chi Upsilon Sigma National Latin Sorority Incorporated Director of Alumnae Relations (August 2023 - July 2024)
- Corazones Unidos Siempre, Chi Upsilon Sigma National Latin Sorority Incorporated Area Expansion Officer Midwest (August 2021 - August 2022)
- Omega Pi Alumnae Chapter of Corazones Unidos Siempre, Chi Upsilon Sigma National Latin Sorority Incorporated Founding President (August 2021 - August 2022)

Describe your understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the AFA board of directors (BOD). What strengths or characteristics do you possess that would make you an effective BOD member? How, specifically, have you demonstrated this?

My understanding of the AFA Board of Directors is that it serves as the strategic and fiduciary leadership body responsible for stewarding the mission, sustainability, and governance of the Association. The directors ensure transparency, alignment with bylaws, and actively guide AFA's vision by setting policy, advancing equity, and supporting the profession. As a scholar-practitioner with over a decade of leadership in education and nonprofit sectors, I bring strong governance, equity-centered program development, and stakeholder engagement experience. I've demonstrated these strengths as Director of Alumnae Relations on a national board, where I fostered community, led strategic initiatives, and managed operations for my alumnae team. I currently serve on two national boards (CSCC and AERA) and have chaired multiple sessions, led grant initiatives, and facilitated cross-organizational collaborations. I center inclusive leadership and justice-driven advocacy, consistently bringing people together to advance shared goals. My commitment to equity, combined with deep governance experience, uniquely equips me to contribute to AFA's strategic direction and mission fulfillment.

**The fraternity and sorority profession (and higher education in general) is a complex, interdisciplinary space with many key stakeholders. What do you see as the greatest opportunities to build stakeholder alignment and consensus over the next five years? How would you effectively lead the association through this exercise in alignment?**

Fraternity and sorority life exists within a larger higher education ecosystem shaped by institutional policy, student needs, alumni influence, and societal expectations. The greatest opportunities for stakeholder alignment lie in centering shared values: student success, equity, belonging, and leadership development. As we acknowledge the unique lenses each group brings into the ecosystem, we much align our mission with the work we are aiming to do. That is, understanding institutional priorities, amplifying student voices, and honoring alumni and national organization partnerships. Throughout my career, I have led cross-sector collaborations that brought together diverse constituencies, from national boards to campus leadership and grassroots student organizations. I've facilitated stakeholder convenings, developed equity-centered strategic plans, and built trust across differing priorities. As Director of Alumnae Relations, I connected generations of members through shared purpose. Through my professional work as a researcher, I've aligned research, policy, and practice for systemic equity change, in and outside of the classroom. To lead AFA in this work, I would create intentional spaces for dialogue, data-informed decision-making, and collective visioning. I believe alignment is not about uniformity, but rather about uniting around core values and cultivating a culture of collaboration and accountability.

**One of the main responsibilities of board members is to maintain financial accountability of the organization. Board members act as trustees of the organization's assets and must exercise due diligence to oversee that the organization is well-managed and that its financial situation remains sound. Please describe a time when you have had to make difficult financial and/or resource allocation decisions and how would you use that experience as you serve on the board.**

As Co-PI at Rutgers for the NSF-funded Community College S-STEM Network (CCSN), I co-lead the development of a national \$10,000 research fellowship program aimed at early-career scholars conducting collaborative research with community college S-STEM practitioners. This 15-month, summer-to-summer initiative required strategic financial planning to ensure both fiscal responsibility and high-impact engagement. With only being able to fund two fellowships in this year, I navigated limited funding and growing interest by creating a competitive selection process, developing equitable evaluation criteria, and structuring stipends to support long-term research involvement. I also managed multi-institutional budget alignment with the other co-PI and ensured compliance with federal guidelines, while centering equity and capacity-building in all funding decisions. These experiences deepened my expertise in balancing mission-driven goals with financial accountability. As a board member, I would bring AFA's financial oversight experience, combining strategic foresight, transparency, and equity-focused decision-making to ensure the Association's resources are maximized in service of its members and mission.

AFA's strategic plan, 'Forward to 50', will be coming to a close in 2026, and the AFA Board of Directors will be called to think about AFA's future strategic direction. Looking forward into the next five years, in what ways you see AFA being uniquely called to serve our profession? Discuss how you typically approach prioritization and allocation of strategic planning efforts, and what you see as the Board of Directors' role in strategic plan execution.

As AFA nears the end of its Forward to 50 plan, the next five years present a vital opportunity to strengthen fraternity/sorority life as a vehicle for equity, student development, and community leadership. AFA is uniquely positioned to lead the profession in reimagining organizational relevance, supporting identity-based organizations, and advocating for culturally responsive practices in an evolving higher education landscape. With my experience advancing equity-focused initiatives across national boards and multi-institutional networks, I see AFA's role expanding as a convener, capacity-builder, and policy thought leader. In strategic planning, I prioritize by aligning initiatives with mission, member needs, and measurable outcomes. At Rutgers and as a national sorority board member, I've led collaborative strategic planning processes rooted in equity, transparency, and data-informed decision-making. The BOD's role is to maintain vision alignment, build buy-in, and ensure accountability across all phases: design, implementation, and evaluation. I bring a systems-thinking approach, grounded in collaboration and inclusive leadership, to guide strategic execution that honors tradition while advancing innovation and sustainability.

As you reflect on this allocation exercise (see next page), please provide some brief commentary on how you approached the allocation of time/energy/resources. Please share any frameworks or perspectives you used in how you allocated your time.

I approached this using a mission-aligned, equity-centered governance lens rooted in AFA's bylaws and my scholar-practitioner perspective. I prioritized fiduciary duties (per Article IV), strategic direction, and sustainable impact. Drawing from my experience as a Co-PI and national board leader, I emphasized areas where Board leadership drives systemic change, including professional development, affinity engagement, and research.

# Allocation Exercise

You receive 100 points, each of which can be spent to prioritize the board's time. Allocate these 100 points based on what priority areas you think the board should spend their time on. Allocate more points to those areas that you think are more important.

<b>Priority Area</b>	<b>Points Allotted</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
Annual Meeting Planning	3	While the annual meeting is valuable for networking and showcasing AFA's work, this is primarily a staff-driven function. Board involvement should focus on alignment with strategic goals rather than detailed planning.
Educational Program Selection	2	This is important but better suited to staff and member committees. The Board's role is to ensure programs align with strategic competencies and equity-centered learning outcomes.
Budget Oversight and Financial Management	30	Strong financial management is essential to every strategic goal. As trustees, Board members must ensure sustainable investments, compliance, and transparent allocation of resources to support innovation and inclusion.
Developing Strategy for Members' Professional Competency and Mentorship	20	AFA's long-term value lies in building the next generation of student affairs leaders. This includes mentorship models and equitable access to leadership development across experience levels.
Stakeholder Outreach & Partnership (NASPA, ASCA, FSL Umbrellas, etc.)	15	AFA must remain engaged with FSL umbrella orgs and higher education associations to remain committed to its mission. Strategic partnerships expand influence, strengthen advocacy efforts, and connect members to broader professional ecosystems.
Communication Strategy	5	Effective communication helps increase member engagement, transparency, and brand visibility. It's critical the Board supports strategic messaging that centers inclusion and access.
Personnel and Association Human Resources	0	Staff supervision is largely an operational matter, except for the Executive Director. Oversight should focus on high-level accountability and organizational culture.
Creating Professional Community through Technology and Identity/Affinity Spaces	10	This supports belonging and retention. Technology-driven affinity spaces are crucial for connecting underrepresented professionals and fostering year-round engagement beyond in-person events. Also being able to speak to a vast membership on their experiences is crucial for the longevity of engagement.
Advancing Research	10	AFA can lead the field by shaping the research agenda around equity, belonging, and community impact in FSL. Board support of practitioner-scholar work builds sector credibility and allows the vast education community to understand our profession and organization more.
Policy and Position Statement Development	5	The Board should actively shape and review timely, inclusive, and values-aligned policy statements that guide institutions and respond to national trends impacting higher education and FSL.
Other (Please describe in the appropriate field)	0	N/A