

*Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*  
*Center for Nonprofit Advancement Board Leadership Award Finalist Questionnaire*

**1. What does being a finalist for this award mean for you and your organization?**

Being selected as a finalist for this award is a huge honor for ISPU, and a wonderful acknowledgement of the time, attention and effort that we have invested in building a diverse, accountable and well-run board. At ISPU, we believe that Board excellence is a critical ingredient for an exceptional nonprofit, and this recognition from the Center for Nonprofit Advancement is an amazing affirmation of this belief.

ISPU is a secular, non-partisan research and education organization dedicated to building understanding and strengthening communities by laying a foundation of facts on American Muslims and issues impacting Muslim communities. We are a small nonprofit that expands its reach by leveraging partnerships, collaborating and building bridges. Our work strengthens Muslim communities and equips all those working toward full and equitable inclusion with solution-seeking research. As a nonprofit that has grown from a grassroots passion project to a pillar organization with nine staff and national reach, we are a resource for both data and best practices, and a model for organizations with similar histories.

The fact that ISPU is a finalist for this award is a signal to the sector - grassroots and peer institutions - that quality Board management and leadership is something to strive for - something that can have positive and direct benefits to the institution. This honor lets organizations we partner with, those who we lift, and the leaders we inform and empower with our work know that this commitment to excellence, this investment in discipline and process is important—that it drives success and positive impact, and is recognized and rewarded.

Dynamic and engaged boards are critical for truly healthy and thriving organizations, and we are proud of the investment that ISPU has made in getting this right. We are so grateful to the Center for Nonprofit Advancement for shining a light on the importance of board excellence through this award.

**2. What have you learned through the application process for the Board Leadership Award?**

The application process for the Board Leadership Award has been an opportunity for reflection, a rare moment to take stock and connect the dots on actions that brought us to where we are today. ISPU was established by a group of friends, and the founding Board was composed largely of them, family and their close contacts. In the early days, the Board was innately passionate about the mission and personally connected to the work, resulting in a very hands-on, engaged and close Board. As we grew, we wanted to retain the passion, collegiality and high engagement level of the early Board, but also add skill sets that were needed, cast a wide net to bring diverse perspectives to the Board and build a consistent expectation of accountability. We wanted to strategically build a Board that broadened our reach, brought

critical skills, reflected those we serve, and deepened our impact - one that could lead ISPU into the future.

For the past several years, we have successfully recruited members annually, building a Board that has the diverse perspectives, talents and fundraising capacity that ISPU needs, and is increasingly reflective of the communities we serve. At the same time, we began enforcing term limits and cascaded the departure of more senior Board members to ensure that the BOD culture - the focus on being highly engaged champions, collegial and mission-focused, collaborative and strategic - was transferred to newer Board members.

The current ISPU board is composed of talented individuals who are principled, have a strong commitment to the mission, and are willing to spend time and use personal and professional resources to advance the organization's mission. Term limits are enforced and an annual Board self-assessment is in place.

This summer, ISPU will have a fully second generation Board. None of the founders or Board members from the first ten years of ISPU's existence will serve. And yet the values of ISPU and the board culture, the passion and commitment to excellence, continues. This Board has always been home to passionate individuals who are incredibly bright and motivated, but over the past five years, it has truly evolved into a model for Board excellence.

This process has allowed us to see how far we have come, how effective this Board development has been, and how important this strategic and consistent effort to build and manage the Board is to ISPU's success.

### **3. What advice would you offer for other organizations/board members striving for excellence in board leadership?**

Based on ISPU's experience, there are three key elements required for excellence in board leadership:

- Culture of open and honest communication
- Regular process of board refreshment and assessment
- Clearly articulated expectations, ownership and accountability

*A culture of open and honest communication* must exist within the Board, and between the Board and the Executive Director and senior staff. The Executive Director and senior staff should not try to feign perfection for the Board. Board meetings should be opportunities for honest discussions, for authentic engagement, for sharing challenges. If your Board does not know enough about your work to provide helpful input, they are not the Board members you need.

And within the Board members, Board meetings and committee meetings are an opportunity to come together for open and engaged discussion in an environment of mutual respect. Encourage healthy debate and dissent, focus on strategic discussions and seek real input.

Board meetings are opportunities for honest discussion and decision making; the real discussions and decisions should not be taking place in sidebars. Organizations with a culture of open communication and discussion are better able to keep the mission at the core of all decisions, and for Board and staff colleagues to see each other as partners in good.

*A regular process of Board refreshment and assessment* is critical for a robust and high functioning board. It is important to identify gaps, replenish the Board regularly and to bring in skills focused on growth and the future—diverse perspectives, individuals who can introduce the organization to new networks and increase both fundraising and impact, and board members who reflect the communities we serve.

Conduct an on-going assessment of skills needed on the BOD, and recruit new members annually. Having ‘classes’ of board members ensures continuity and transmission of board culture, systems and strengths. Enforce term limits, and do it in a way that allows for mentorship, overlap, a continuation and transmission of board culture. Refreshing your Board is one of the best ways to ensure the influx of new skills and perspectives, and to keep the Board engaged, productive and dynamic.

And finally, *clearly articulating what is expected of Board members* and holding them accountable is key for a thriving board. Joining a nonprofit board is a commitment; it is an honor and a contract with rights and responsibilities. From the first discussion with a potential Board member, both parties should assess for mutual fit. Board members must prioritize membership on your Board, it should be one of their most important commitments during their tenure.

From the interview process to on-boarding and mentorship of new members, it is important to clearly articulate the expectations of Board membership. Set up systems of accountability and regular opportunities to reflect and self-reflect on achievement of those expectations. Don't be afraid to hold Board members and each other accountable, and have them leave if the relationship is not a good fit. The Board Chair and committee chairs should expect engagement from their committee members and be very clear that ownership of the work of the Board is a shared responsibility.