



## **Daniel Zahn**

Liberal Arts & Schreyer '20  
Penn State Forward Candidate

### **Board of Trustees Candidate Questionnaire**

#### **1. Engagement with Penn State: Describe your connection to Penn State and why it has prepared you to guide the University's strategic future.**

My connection to Penn State has spanned my life, and I know Penn State's power and am deeply committed to our University's success. This connection empowered me to develop leadership skills, fostered my passion for student advocacy, and instilled my clear understanding of our community's values, all of which have prepared me to guide the University's strategic future.

I still remember when I went to Penn State for the Pennsylvania Junior Academy of Science in middle school and then Spend A Summer Day in high school. Both introduced me to the beautiful campus and varied opportunities. As a student, I took advantage of those opportunities. I served in leadership positions across various organizations, including as president of the Mock Trial Association, co-founder of Future Opportunities Reached by Mentorship Consulting, and co-founder to the Scholar Ambassadors. My involvement in student government, the Office of Student Conduct, and several honors programs reflects my dedication to fostering community and inclusivity. Over my four years at Penn State, I advocated for reforms in speech codes and the conduct processes. I also served on multiple boards and committees, contributing to efforts aimed at increasing diversity and transparency.

My connection to Penn State continues to this day. In addition to serving on the Student Engagement Committee of the Scholar Alumni Society Board, I also mentor dozens of future Penn State lawyers through the Honors College, College of the Liberal Arts, and Presidential Leadership Academy. I have frequently been invited to speak to Penn Staters, including by the Liberal Arts Career Enrichment Network, Paterno Fellows Program, and Presidential Leadership Academy. I am a member of the Penn State Alumni Association and the Golden Lion Society. These experiences have allowed me to stay current on the issues facing Penn State and its students. They have also informed my strategic vision for the university and my dedication to helping it thrive.

I am excited about the possibility of continuing to serve Penn State on the Board of Trustees. I am committed to ensuring that Penn State continues to provide an exceptional education while embracing its mission of research, service, and institutional excellence.

#### **2. Experience with governance/board service: What experience do you have participating in a collaborative fiduciary decision-making body?**

I've gained valuable experience in participating in collaborative decision-making bodies both at and beyond Penn State. I approach decision-making with a focus on inclusivity, transparency, and long-term impact. I listen to all viewpoints, foster an environment of mutual respect, and work with others to ensure that decisions align with the institution's values and objectives.

At Penn State, I led the executive boards of the Mock Trial Association, Scholar Ambassador Team, and Future Opportunities Reached by Mentorship. I also chaired the Student Organization Conduct Committee. My experience leading teams enabled me to hone my skills to ensure that all team members were heard, for example, by recognizing when some people were not speaking up in groups, finding time to meet with them individually, and making sure they knew their voice was valuable.

I also participated in various collaborative decision-making bodies as a student, such as the Student Conduct Committee, the student government's Judicial Board, the Schreyer Dean's Advisory Board, the Schreyer Diversity Task Force, and the Paterno Fellows Student Advisory Board. These experiences helped me develop the skills to listen to and work with people from different university constituencies towards common goals, which I will apply if elected. They also make me especially attuned to the student experience.

On the *Stanford Law Review* executive board, I helped make editorial and personnel decisions for the journal, in collaboration with the entire board. I standardized procedures, increased accountability, and shepherded dozens of articles through the editorial process.

In my current role on the Scholar Alumni Society Board, I collaborate with fellow board members to guide initiatives that support the university's academic mission and enhance the alumni experience. This position has refined my ability to engage in thoughtful, collaborative discussions and consider various perspectives before making decisions that impact the broader community. For example, my role has involved providing feedback to student organizations within the honors college and working with the college's administration on its goals and strategic vision.

These experiences have prepared me to contribute meaningfully to a fiduciary body like the Board of Trustees, where sound, forward-thinking decisions are paramount.

**3. Brings 1-2 skills from skill set inventory: What of the skills reflected in the Board Skillset Inventory would you bring to your service as a Penn State trustee and how did you develop this skill/these skills?**

I will bring legal expertise—with a specific focus in higher education law—and my humanities background to the Board.

**Law and Higher Education**

The Board self-reports a four-person difference between current board members and desired members with legal expertise. I am a lawyer at a nonprofit organization and am prepared to navigate complex legal issues, assess risk, and make informed decisions in high-stakes environments. I received my law degree from Stanford Law School. While there, I helped teach students Constitutional Law and served on the *Stanford Law Review* Editorial Board. After graduating, I clerked for a United States Appeals Court. My work as an attorney has focused on protecting civil rights and academic freedom in higher education, enabling me to develop expertise in the legal responsibilities key in institutional governance. This skill is crucial for

ensuring that Penn State's policies and decisions comply with legal standards and reflect ethical practices. I am ready to fill this gap.

### **Humanities**

The Board reports a lack of trustee experience in the humanities, which is my academic background. At Penn State, I majored in English, Philosophy, and Communication Arts & Sciences. I worked as a Rock Ethics Institute Undergraduate Research Fellow in the Empathy and Moral Psychology Lab. And I represented the Communication Arts & Sciences Department as Marshal when I graduated. I apply my humanities background daily in my legal work. Key legal issues in my focus area require not only the capacity to interpret regulatory provisions or analyze a fact pattern but also understand fundamental questions in American society about democracy, freedom, individual rights, and personal expression. My humanities background will provide a unique perspective to the Board, allowing me to situate Penn State's issues within the context of human culture and experiences. It also will empower me to provide solutions tailored to Penn State's role in a democratic society and to analyze the ethical implications of Penn State's actions.

#### **4. What about your life experience and unique background makes your voice important to be heard at the Board of Trustees?**

The three most salient aspects of my life experience and background that make my voice important as a trustee are my religious background, sexual identity, and age.

As a member of the Jewish community, I have closely followed the concerns about campus environments that reflect increasing challenges for Jewish students. These issues are deeply personal to me. I also have listened to and understand the diverse perspectives in the Jewish community, through my work with Penn State Hillel and the Stanford Jewish Law Student Association. I am prepared to contribute meaningfully to the Board's decision making to ensure that all students feel respected, safe, and valued, while respecting free speech law and culture.

While Penn State has been recognized as a welcoming community in the past for LGBTQ+ students, the Board also has been scrutinized by students for not doing enough. As a gay man, I know that LGBTQ+ people today are targeted by cultural animosity and our legal protections are being repealed. The Board must respond and I am excited to contribute my perspective, and help bridge the gaps with LGBTQ+ students and employees, to ensure that they feel heard and we work together to build an inclusive and supportive environment at Penn State.

Additionally, if elected, I would become the youngest non-student trustee. Young alumni perspectives are critical to ensure the Board is responsive to today's most pressing issues, as we have the most recent first-hand experience. And through service as a recent alum on the Board, I will show recent graduates that they can get involved in volunteer and philanthropic work for Penn State today—whether by mentoring students, donating to Penn State efforts that resonate with them, or serving on Board across the University.

My experiences navigating these identities have informed my approach to leadership and advocacy. They have strengthened my resolve to ensure that Penn State remains a place where

diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated, and where every student feels seen, heard, and respected. My unique background and lived experiences will inform my contributions on the Board and they will also help me because, through them, I have deep connections with others who have not always felt heard and can elevate their critical perspectives in institutional decision-making.

## Biography

Daniel Zahn is a nonprofit attorney and a Penn State Forward candidate. He focuses on free speech and individual rights with an emphasis on defending college students' and faculty members' free speech, academic freedom, religious liberty, and due process rights.

Zahn graduated with honors and highest distinction from Penn State in 2020 with bachelor's degrees in Philosophy, English, and Communication Arts & Sciences. He was a Schreyer Scholar, Paterno Fellow, and Presidential Leadership Academy member. While a student, he developed a mentorship program for underrepresented students navigating the college application process and led advocacy for reforms to Penn State's speech codes and conduct processes. He graduated with over 20 awards for academics, writing, and leadership.

Zahn attended Stanford Law School, where he served as Executive Editor of the *Stanford Law Review* and co-president of the Jewish Law Students Association, won multiple academic prizes, and worked on a Supreme Court petition through the Religious Liberty Clinic. He clerked on a federal appellate court in Atlanta before joining his current nonprofit as a litigation fellow.

Zahn currently serves on the Penn State Scholar Alumni Society Board and has mentored dozens of Penn State students through Schreyer, Liberal Arts, and the Presidential Leadership Academy. He frequently supports Penn State students exploring career pathways, including through the Liberal Arts Career Enrichment Network, the Paterno Fellows Program, and Presidential Leadership Academy events.

He grew up in Allentown and now lives in Washington, D.C. He is an Alumni Association and Golden Lion Society member.

## Position Statement

**Daniel Zahn** is running with **Uma Moriarity** and **Katherine Wheatle** to move **Penn State Forward**. They are committed to advancing academic and institutional excellence with four policy focus areas.

**Governance reform.** Zahn spent years improving the student conduct process, academic freedom, and individual rights as a student and will continue this work as a trustee by advancing policies protecting Penn Staters who voice concerns about University decision-making from institutional retaliation and enabling public access to police and budget records.

**Educational equity.** Penn Staters deserve a safe environment that pushes them to grow. That cannot happen if they must focus on high tuition payments, housing and food insecurity, violence, or prejudice. Zahn attended Penn State because a scholarship made it his most affordable option. He worked part-time, struggled to find affordable housing, faced antisemitism and homophobia, and is currently paying off student debt. He will advance policies to break down the barriers preventing Penn Staters from achieving their full potential.

**Workers' rights.** Zahn worked an on-campus job at Penn State. He knows decent wages make a huge difference for students. He will support the workers who make Penn State's operations possible through advocating for fair hiring and wages and protecting unionization rights.

**Climate action.** Zahn believes Penn State's land-grant mission requires that the University marshal institutional resources to respond to the climate crisis. This includes making campuses carbon-neutral by 2035 and supporting climate education and research.

Learn more about **Daniel**, **Uma**, and **Katherine** and their plans at [PSUForward.org/vision](https://psuforward.org/vision).