

Diverse, Inclusive, and Equitable Boards



Why So Slow?



Many higher education institutions have a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Where are the boards in this commitment and how far have they come?

How boards handle diversity, equity, and inclusion issues is of growing importance—and a key to an institution’s commitment to making progress with these issues.

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VISIT ANY COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY WEBSITE and it will not take long to find such words as diversity, equity, inclusion, social justice, inclusive excellence, and the like. Most have an office (people and resources) dedicated to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Most have DEI statements; some include the words in their missions. Most have DEI as part of their strategic plan. Most feature pictures of a beautiful campus teeming with diversity in all forms. Most offer many affinity groups; there are multicultural centers; and since 2007 there is a National Listing of LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges & Universities (Campus Pride Index). So many words, people, plans yet many wonder, where is there real progress? Real change? Why so slow?

FACULTY AND BOARD DIVERSITY

Having worked for 16 years at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on research, strategies, policies, and practices to diversify the faculty ranks, including more women in STEM disciplines and more faculty of color onto tenure-tracks and into tenured positions, at the rank of full professor, and at historically White, prestigious colleges and universities, I recall frustration over the glacial pace of change. My colleagues and I pondered why and what to do. Our research revealed numerous structural barriers—barriers few wanted to examine carefully, let alone modify—including policies and practices surrounding searches and hiring; mentoring; promotion and tenure; peer review; what counts

as “scholarship” and “appropriate” journals in which to publish; evaluations of teaching; and the like. Faculty diversity is still not great, an issue compounded by the growth in nontenure-track and part-time positions that remain at the periphery of the academy.

Considering college and university governing boards, AGB’s report *Policies, Practices, and Composition of Governing Boards of Colleges, Universities, and Institutionally Related Foundations 2021* (<https://agb.org/product/policies-practices-composition-2021/>), which is based on 2020 data reveals that older White males still occupy the majority of board seats. “Self-perpetuating” (the term itself is important, which I will get to in a moment) boards at private institutions (as opposed to publics where appointments are made by

Editor’s Note: This is the first in a two-part series around board diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) engagement.

TAKEAWAYS



- The vast majority of board seats at colleges and universities are held by older White males. Progress for women has been slow and for persons of color negligible.
- Building diverse, inclusive, and equitable boards requires focus on individual trustees, the board as a group, and the institution. While there is much lip service paid to wanting a diverse, inclusive, and equitable board, there are many factors that impede progress.
- Impediments to progress include the personal commitment required of each trustee, group dynamics, structural issues, inertia, mind-sets rooted in the past, challenges of definitions, and elusive metrics.

governors) are composed as follows: 83 percent White, 82 percent over age 50, and 64 percent male. Changes by race remain negligible and by gender, slow.

CORPORATE BOARD DIVERSITY

Before turning to my views on why, a quick look at the private sector where—despite research and agreement that diverse boards (by gender and race) have a positive impact on corporate earnings and directors are increasingly interested in diversity—change has also been hampered. A March 11, 2021, *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article by Moats and DeNicola shared findings from consulting firm PricewaterhouseCooper’s 2020 Annual Corporate Directors survey of the 3,000 largest publicly traded U.S. companies. It showed that only 12.5 percent of board directors were from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups (up from 10 percent in 2015) and only 4 percent were Black (up from 3 percent in 2015). Progress for White women was better, going from 13 percent in 2015 to 21 percent in 2020. That survey also revealed that the reason for slow progress, for most male directors was that “there were not enough qualified candidates from underrepresented groups,” and “change isn’t really necessary,” whereas female directors felt the reason had to do with the “lack of prioritization from board and executive leadership.”

The HBR coauthors noted that while “a majority of directors report being interested in diversity (at least in theory),” interest does not necessarily translate to real change for four reasons: (1) low turnover on corporate boards; (2) inertia—diversity is “nice to have” but not mandatory; (3) limited candidate pools; and (4) inadequate succession planning so that when a vacancy becomes available the organization finds itself being reactive with diversity on the “backburner” in the

scramble for a replacement. These same reasons (excuses?) exist for higher education boards, as well, and there are numerous others highlighted here.

WORKING ON DEI WITH THE BOARD

In 2016, I coauthored a paper with Peter Eckel for the TIAA Institute, *Boards and Institutional Diversity: Missed Opportunities, Points of Leverage*, which examined how “boards and institutional leaders can forge a tighter link between governance and campus diversity that leads to positive progress on a difficult and nuanced set of challenges.” The paper acknowledged that “boards themselves do not advance campus diversity initiatives; instead, they can illuminate the context, ensure attention to the issues, hold institutions accountable for progress, and contribute their resources, insights, and wisdom” (p. 3).

In the five years since that paper was published, a lot has transpired with respect to race and social justice, matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion on college and university campuses, and the criticality of board engagement beyond oversight and holding the president accountable. To move forward and really have influence, boards must engage deeply and take a more active role in advancing DEI, which requires that they focus on themselves—not easily done. This article delineates myriad reasons, in five categories—individual, group, structural, inertia, and mind-sets and metrics—why making progress on DEI at the board level is challenging.

INDIVIDUAL TRUSTEE COMMITMENT

DEI is unlike other topics that come before boards (e.g., finance, investments, endowment growth, master plans) where (a) some trustees have expertise and others

do not; (b) the board can rely on those with that expertise to oversee related matters appropriately; and (c) some trustees can more fully engage on the topics at meetings and some less. Instead, DEI requires that each trustee has skin in the game and there are several factors working against that.

1. Personal preferences. Twenty-five years of consulting with boards has revealed that many trustees prefer:

- Clarity over ambiguity
- Results over process
- Efficiency over deliberation
- Answers over questions
- Solutions over problems
- Problem-solving over problem-framing
- Decision-making over sense-making
- Action over introspection

For fiduciary/oversight issues, boards can comfortably stay on the left side of the pairs listed above. Board engagement in DEI matters, however, requires much more of the latter than the former in each pair. Further, professor and author Brené Brown has said, working on DEI requires uncertainty, social risk, and emotional exposure/vulnerability—none of which most trustees signed up for, or thought they would confront, when joining a board.

2. Power dynamics and wealth. Leadership positions on boards are often granted based on philanthropy—past and anticipated giving patterns and dollar amounts. Many trustees fear upsetting the largest donors by suggesting other reasons, characteristics, and qualities to consider in bringing new voices onto the board and into leadership roles as officers and committee chairs.

3. Personal/internal messaging. In a *Harvard Business Review* article (May/June 1991), “Teaching Smart People How to Learn,” Harvard professor Chris Argyris reminds us that people often become defensive when confronted with feedback that things are not going well or could be improved. The natural tendency is to deflect and place blame elsewhere rather than look critically at one’s own behaviors. In the board DEI context, this might mean that board leaders think to themselves, “I am a smart, successful businessperson; therefore, I don’t have a problem,” or “I am an expert, unbiased, inclusive; it is others on the board who have issues.”

4. Lack the DEI expertise and fears. Because DEI is not likely an area of expertise for most trustees, they may fear being “exposed”

as not knowing. Other fears trustees express surrounding DEI matters are making a misstep, offending colleagues, and being vulnerable. With so much at stake, these fears are understandable, but they certainly hamper progress especially if they are not expressed and acknowledged.

5. Had DEI training at the office, already know everything.

This is a common refrain from trustees who may feel that their workplace DEI training should be sufficient. It is certainly helpful, but it has nothing to do with how trustees interact with each other in the context of the board’s culture on these matters.

6. Lack multicultural awareness. This is an important variation from the “definitions trap” (below) because it moves beyond DEI definitions and into developing understanding of others’ lived experiences, learning inclusive language, and interacting with trustee colleagues in new ways.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Two group dynamics issues are prominent and can be especially problematic with respect to making progress on advancing DEI at the board level: camps and consensus.

1. Camps. Boards are oftentimes divided into “camps” (or factions) on DEI matters, albeit rarely acknowledged explicitly or overtly. Typical camps are: (a) those who feel strongly about the need to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable board culture. Sometimes this group includes those who have been most marginalized and have experienced firsthand structural racism (BIPOC trustees); women; younger and newer board members—many of whom have little perceived power or voice at the board table; (b) a sometimes sizable number who outwardly express interest in and commitment to DEI efforts but who feel ambivalent in actuality; (c) the clueless and indifferent; and (d) a few who outwardly (at least in trusted circles) express cynicism, skepticism, or that DEI work at the board level is a waste of the board’s time when it should be focused on the capital campaign, athletics, or the investment portfolio.

2. Consensus. As long as consensus is viewed as making everyone happy, it can work against progress. For the sake of not “making waves,” I witnessed a subcommittee of three female trustees who felt one way give in to two male trustees on an important decision. Consensus can also squelch quieter, dissenting viewpoints. This is not unlike groupthink—where members of groups go along to get along and change is stymied. Working on DEI at the board

level will not make everyone happy; that is not the point. No DEI engagement program, or the board activities to support it, will be to everyone's liking. It is difficult to find a path forward, even with a subcommittee of the board, where if even one influential person doesn't care for the program, it can stop the larger group.

STRUCTURAL ISSUES

There are numerous structural issues, some rooted in history that have been replicated without examination over many years, that can impede progress for boards wishing to be more diverse, inclusive, and equitable including:

- 1. Bylaws.** Sometimes the bylaws are antiquated and even if reviewed periodically, they remain little changed over many years. Many of the items in the list immediately below are, therefore, cemented into the bylaws and go unexamined either to consider impact (reinforcing the status quo) or to change them.
- 2. Executive committees.** On large boards, it is oftentimes necessary to have an Executive Committee (EC) to oversee work between meetings and to provide counsel to the president. The EC is typically composed of the board's officers and committee chairs; and, often, those positions are filled by the largest donors and the most powerful. It is common for these positions to be held by the same people for many years so it can be impossible for newcomers to get a seat and voice at the EC table.
- 3. Board leadership succession.** For the same reasons just noted, officer and committee chair positions are held among the same "inner circle" of the power elite and succession occurs with a wink and a nod between the existing (oftentimes older, wealthy, white male) chair and the persons of his choosing.
- 4. Self-perpetuating boards.** Sitting board members select new board members and the pool of candidates too often look just like those already on the board—the looking glass phenomenon.
- 5. Terms without limit.** Even though bylaws may say there are term limits and that trustees must roll off the board, exceptions are frequently made that preserve the status quo.
- 6. Episodic meetings.** Because many college and university boards meet only three times a year, it can be challenging for boards to sustain the necessary focus on DEI matters over the course of an academic year, including between meetings. Further,

infrequent meetings make it difficult for trustees (especially newcomers and those outside the inner circle) to build the requisite bonds of trust.

- 7. Board size.** College and university boards are often quite large, and this factor alone makes it challenging for trustees to get to know one another to build trust and feel comfortable being vulnerable in the DEI space.

INERTIA

Several factors make it challenging to overcome inertia and get started.

- 1. We've always governed this way; why change anything?** It took Harvard 360 years to rethink its governance policies and practices. And that happened during the tenure of its first and only female president, Drew Faust. It can be easy for the boards of great universities to rest on their laurels rather than go through processes to rethink established, engrained routines, cultures, and structures.
- 2. Lack of urgency.** Other matters—capital campaign, master planning, strategic planning, endowment growth, enrollment plans—are almost always more pressing than DEI matters. I recall a conference where presidents were gathered at a session focused on the top five priorities on their campuses: DEI was always one of them, but seldom made it to the top three, despite a great deal of goodwill and some awareness that it matters a lot to a lot of stakeholders. Part of this has to do with comfort levels and lack of technical expertise for trustees, but even presidents found it difficult to have DEI front and center and most pressing.
- 3. The definitions trap.** Words matter, no doubt. However, I have seen boards get derailed, unable to move beyond the first stages as people argue over how "best" to define diversity, equity, and inclusion. A simple internet search yields literally hundreds of slightly different variations for each term.
- 4. Linear thinking and wanting it all laid out in advance.** Many issues that come before boards (e.g., financial, enrollment, endowment, fundraising) have technical solutions, metrics, time frames, and staff expertise. Working on these matters is linear, there are right ways to proceed, and a plan forward is more easily created. DEI matters are not like that; instead, they are more adaptive in nature and must be figured out as you go along (despite what some



consulting firms with cookie-cutter packages would say). Because boards are composed of individuals at varying stages in their personal journeys, and because the group itself needs to examine its own culture and patterns of behavior, there is no clear roadmap or linear, step-wise process.

MIND-SETS AND METRICS

Finally, at least three issues of mind-sets and metrics can stymie progress.

1. Pathological short-termism. I read this term in *The Good Ancestor* (2020) by Roman Krznaric and it struck me how our human tendencies in the United States (especially) to think quarterly (particularly in business), and annually (in universities), may keep us from thinking long term—really long term. Colleges and universities have been around for hundreds of years and have more staying power than most corporations and yet trustees find the current topics most compelling. Further, trustees are not thinking about 20, 30, 50 years out when our campuses—and donor bases—will be far more demographically diverse. What then?

2. Isn't DEI someone else's area? Over the years, I have watched universities struggle with whether to centralize DEI and hire a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) or decentralize and leave matters up to individual schools, departments, or divisions. With the former,

it is common for trustees say, “Didn't we just hire a CDO? Isn't that their job?” and think that progress at the campus level is all that matters, or that it will trickle over to the board sufficiently (as opposed to the board leading by example and through its own journey). With the latter, trustees may wonder where accountability lies, but not necessarily see that as with the board.

3. Elusive metrics and accountability mechanisms. Another issue is that defining success, or even progress, is challenging. It has been said that “what gets measured gets done” and “if you can't measure it, you can't do it,” and there is certainly truth to those statements. The issue is: How do you assess where individuals are in their knowledge and comfort with DEI matters? What metrics exist for board performance on DEI matters? Too many boards still think DEI is all about the “D”—add “diverse” members (to the board, faculty, staff, and student body), and all is good—without consideration for equity or inclusion.

I realize this is a daunting set of challenges that impede progress engaging the board in DEI for the board, and I am sure that I have not listed all the barriers that boards encounter when they set out to do this important work. In the next article, I will offer strategies for confronting and overcoming many of these roadblocks. ■

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