

Boards and institutional diversity: Missed opportunities, points of leverage

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About this Research

Governing boards and matters of campus diversity are rarely linked. Since the financial crisis of 2008, board agendas have been dominated by financial and enrollment matters. Yet boards can play a significant leadership role in addressing issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education.

To help boards and institutions meet these pressing challenges, the TIAA Institute invited this work by Peter Eckel and Cathy Trower. They explore how boards and institutional leaders can forge a tighter link between governance and campus diversity, one that leads to positive progress on a difficult and nuanced set of issues. Believing that boards are uniquely positioned to advance change in ways other institutional stakeholders cannot, the authors describe the many points of leverage that boards can apply. They also note that boards face many hurdles in this arena, and offer strategies to overcome them.

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Executive Summary

Boards of trustees have a significant leadership role to play when it comes to addressing issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education, yet too rarely are boards engaged appropriately on these issues. Diversity touches multiple aspects of board oversight, including mission and values, strategy, finance, and even intercollegiate athletics. Working collaboratively with administrators, faculty and staff, boards can keep sustained attention on diversity matters over the long term.

Yet, advancing diversity, equity and inclusion is difficult for a host of reasons, including the lack of diversity on boards themselves; challenges in framing the issues for action; racism and the challenges of talking about race; low levels of confidence by key stakeholders in board leadership; and common governance shortcomings, including a lack of sophistication on student and faculty issues, insufficient use of data and dashboards, and the pull of competing issues. But boards can make a real difference by employing a wide range of tactics. We acknowledge that this work is challenging; it takes time, and in many ways, the deck is stacked against the board.

This essay describes the challenges boards face and offers strategies to advance their work addressing the critically important issue of diversity, equity and inclusion on campus, not only for the betterment of higher education, but for the nation as a whole as well.

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Key Takeaways

- Boards should work with institutional leaders to address the challenges of diversity, equity and inclusion. Conversations at most colleges and universities seem to call for action by university administrators, faculty and students, but typically not by the board.
- Corporate and nonprofit boards alike need to address many issues, including: overall organizational performance; risk and compliance; financial well-being; and strategic focus and mission. The issue of diversity weaves through all of these matters. For example, the ability to recruit and retain a diverse student body that reflects our changing population is closely related to institutions' financial well-being; the ability to do so better than one's competitors is a strategic issue.
- The fact that most boards themselves are not very diverse presents a hurdle that must be overcome if boards are to successfully advance a campus diversity agenda. Working to diversify their own membership and to adopt inclusive practices and diversity policies are first-order tasks in addressing campus diversity and improving governance.
- Challenges with key fundamentals of effective governance pose additional obstacles for boards' efforts related to campus diversity. Too often boards lack a sophisticated understanding of student issues, don't use data and dashboards well or consistently, and are not seen by stakeholders as having the legitimacy necessary to drive efforts to address diversity issues.
- Board-level strategies to advance campus diversity include taking ownership of the issue, defining success and setting goals, recognizing that conflict is inevitable, holding the president accountable and supporting that individual, and translating their own experiences from outside higher education to the issues at hand.

Introduction

“A subject belongs at the board level precisely because a subject is controversial – and the sooner the better,” admonished Peter Drucker (1990, p. 171) to the leaders of nonprofit organizations. Colleges and universities saw a tremendous amount of controversy related to diversity and inclusion during the past academic year (Jaschik, 2015) and are likely to see more this year as well (New, 2016). So where are boards of trustees on this controversial subject? We suggest that most are not where they should be, and offer suggestions as to how they can play a more meaningful role by leading from the boardroom.

Governing boards and matters of campus diversity are rarely linked. The conversation about diversity at most colleges and universities, and the challenges of creating environments that meet the needs of minority students, seem to call for action by university administrators, faculty, and students, but not typically by boards. Indeed, governing boards are not normally part of the national conversation about higher education reform except as pushed by organizations such as the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) or the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA). Major foundations and other organizations advocating improved student success and/or teaching and learning innovation through technology rarely, if ever, mention the role boards could play in fostering change and seem to have little interest in them. When governance does make the headlines, it's too often because of board misbehavior rather than as a result of the board having brought about constructive institutional change.

Further, issues of campus diversity, equity and inclusion have not been atop most board agendas, which, since the economic downturn beginning in 2008, have largely been dominated by financial and enrollment matters.

In this paper, we explore 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. But first, why even attempt to do so? We believe that boards are uniquely positioned to advance change in ways that other key institutional stakeholders cannot. We recognize that boards are not management. 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, insight and wisdom. Simply put, boards are meant to govern, partner in leadership, and be accountable—along with the president—for institutional outcomes.

However—and this is a big caveat—the deck is stacked against boards making positive contributions on the issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. Given the history of race, inclusion (or exclusion) and equity (or inequality) in the United States, we know that



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progress on these issues is rarely easy. It may be even more difficult from the boardroom; nevertheless, efforts to address these issues must be undertaken. This essay makes the case for boards to play a consistent and meaningful role in advancing campus diversity in collaboration with administrators, faculty and others; explores the difficulties in doing so; and offers strategies to help boards and their institutions move forward.

We tackle this topic as a series of problems (or opportunities, if you're a "glass half full" kind of person); some are related to the topic at hand (diversity) and others are more broadly applicable to effective governance overall.

The problems we see with respect to boards and diversity issues include:

- Challenges and opportunities associated with diversity have not been appropriately framed by boards;
- Many governing boards are not diverse;
- Many governing boards lack a sophisticated understanding about or are out of touch with student issues;
- Determining key metrics and the most effective use of data and dashboards is difficult;
- Confidence in the board on the part of key stakeholders is often low;
- Conversations about race are often quite difficult; and
- Many boards do not consider diversity issues as part of their work, which may need to be redefined.

We explore each of these challenges below, but first we want to be clear about our assumptions and focus for this paper. First, we think and write about governance rather than diversity. Thus, at its heart, this is a paper about governance. Diversity, equity and inclusion are broad topics about which we know some things, but do not purport to have the depth of understanding that others—far more focused on issues of race on campus—have. Second, this paper is about racial diversity and equity, not other types of diversity such as gender, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status (although there may be some application of our ideas to these as well). While we address the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion, we recognize that others are better qualified to provide guidance to the differences in and overlap of these areas. For instance, Estela Bensimon from the University of Southern California recently wrote about equity in *Inside Higher Education* (2016); Shaun Harper at Penn has written extensively on the persistence and success of Black male students (for example, 2012); and UCLA's Sylvia Hurtado has written on inclusive campus climates (2015). Another excellent resource on institutional achievement and inclusion goals comes from The College Board (Taylor, Milem, & Coleman 2016).

Further, this paper focuses on governance of predominately White institutions (PWIs). While Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and their boards grapple with issues of diversity and inclusion, we expect the dynamics and issues on such campuses to be different in important ways, given their historical missions and focus, and the more racially diverse composition of their boards and student bodies. We see potential parallels in boards' approaches to diversity issues at HBCUs and Tribal Colleges, but also recognize that many other factors shape the governance of this latter group of institutions. The conversation and work related to diversity at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) may mirror that at PWIs or at HBCUs, depending on the mission, demographics, and history of the institution. Thus, some boards and leaders of HSIs, HBCUs, and Tribal Colleges may find this discussion helpful; others may not.¹

Diversity is the wide range of national, ethnic, racial and other backgrounds of U.S. residents and immigrants as social groupings, co-existing in American culture. In addition to encompassing national, racial and ethnic backgrounds, the term also includes gender, sexual orientation, class, and much more. (Adapted from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation definition.)

Inclusion authentically brings traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision making and policymaking. More than simply assuring numerical representation, inclusion involves authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging for diverse individuals and/or groups. (Adapted from the Annie E. Casey Foundation definition.)

Equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept. Systemic equity flows from a combination of interrelated elements consciously designed to create, support and sustain social justice. It is a robust system and dynamic process that reinforces and replicates equitable ideas, power, resources, strategies, conditions, habits and outcomes. (Adapted from the Annie E. Casey Foundation definition.)

1. One of the authors, Peter Eckel, serves as a trustee at an HSI, the University of LaVerne (CA).

Diversity is a Governance Issue

First, why focus on diversity as a board-level agenda topic? Can't this work simply be delegated to the administration and faculty, and the board can monitor progress on it? Or, might diversity be a topic for the student affairs committee to discuss? We believe that diversity is too complex and too important for boards not to take it on. Progress toward equity in student graduation rates, the faculty ranks, and even in the presidency have been too slow for too long. For instance, the share of minority presidents is low, at 13 percent in 2012 for all institutions and 9 percent at predominately White institutions; this number has remained fairly constant over a 25-year period, (ACE, 2012) even given concerted efforts to increase it.

Boards of all types—corporate and nonprofit alike—need to address a plethora of issues including overall organizational and managerial health and performance, with a focus on senior personnel work and talent; risk and compliance; financial well-being and investment strategy; stakeholder (or shareholder) relations; and strategic focus and mission (Lorsch, 2012; Kehoe, Lund, & Speilmann, 2016). The issue of diversity is part of all of these matters, which may in fact be part of the reason it often gets lost.

With regard to mission and values, for example, any university concerned about social mobility and equity by definition should be focused on diversity. Furthermore, most university mission statements and declarations of values include references to diversity (and, more frequently today, equity and inclusion as well). Indeed, advancing the democratic ideals of inclusion and openness is tied to race. For instance, a disproportionate share of students on Pell Grants (53 percent) are minority students, who make up 42 percent of all students.²

Diversity is a financial issue about which boards should be concerned as well. The ability to recruit and retain a diverse student body that reflects our changing population is closely related to the financial well-being of institutions and state systems. Demographic trends indicate that in 2019, high schools will graduate 197,000 more Hispanics, 49,000 more Asian/Pacific Islander students, 41,000 more Black students, and 228,000 fewer White students than in 2008 (Prescott & Bransberger, 2012). As all trustees know, students bring with them the tuition dollars that provide the financial underpinnings of our institutions, particularly for those most tuition-driven and/or operating in an environment with declining or stagnant state appropriations.

Diversity is also a strategic matter. How well is the institution prepared to serve diverse students, and prepare all of its students to live in an increasingly diverse world? Consider this: Currently four states are “minority-majority” and by the 2020s another five states are predicted to be so. Projecting out to 2060, 22 states will be minority-majority, including the seven largest states, which approximately two-thirds of the country's population call



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2. Thanks to Ramon Ruiz a doctoral student in Penn's Graduate School of Education for these numbers drawn from 2011-12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data.

home (Tiexeira, Frey, & Griffin, 2015). If strategy is, at least in part, about achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Porter, 1996), and boards are meant to focus on institutional long-term strategy, to what extent are boards confident that their institution can compete against other institutions to recruit and retain increasingly diverse students, and educate minority and majority students better than (or at least as well as) their competitors?

Finally, diversity can manifest itself in areas of board work that are not immediately transparent. For example, diversity can be framed as an athletics issue. One only need to reflect back on the impactful role of the football team in the diversity protests at the University of Missouri in the Fall of 2015 (Bentley, 2016). The issue of race and athletics runs deep. Harper and Harris (2012) documented the overrepresentation of Black men in Division I football and basketball teams: In 2012, Black males comprised less than 4 percent of full-time undergraduates at public colleges and universities, yet accounted for 55 percent of basketball and football players at public Division I institutions. They cite a study comparing the graduation rates of Division I athletes across four cohorts, which found that the graduation rate of Black male student-athletes was 46 percent, compared to 59 percent for all student-athletes. As Harper and Harris noted, “these and similar disparities raise questions and concerns about the extent to which Black men are exploited for athletic purposes, the millions of dollars that are generated by the NCAA and its member institutions, and how those dollars are put to use.” (2012, p. 4). As Drucker says, controversial issues need to be discussed in the boardroom.

Boards Are Positioned to Act

Boards are uniquely positioned to drive and sustain a focus on diversity because of a few basic realities of the academic environment. First, senior administrators are faced with a vast, if not overwhelming, set of issues that need their immediate attention. Second, real transformational change in higher education is a long-term effort (Eckel, Green, & Hill, 2001) extending well beyond the average presidential tenure of 6.5 years (American Council on Education, 2012). Third, higher education tends to be a fairly insular sector, with most tenured faculty members having spent their entire careers inside the academy; this is true also of the overwhelming majority of presidents and provosts (American Council on Education, 2012; Eckel, King, & Cook, 2009). These career paths create what is known as “domain expertise,” which can lead to three challenges (and the deeper the domain expertise the higher the hurdles): (1) shortcomings in recognizing, interpreting and integrating new knowledge (known by social scientists as cognitive entrenchment); (2) the tendency to overestimate the accurateness of judgments and prognostications (known as group overconfidence); and (3) an unquestioned consensus on the problems and how they are framed, resulting in less consideration of alternatives (Almandoz & Tilscik, 2016).

Boards have a unique ability to address diversity issues. They can:

- avoid the immediate and focus on the important
- take a long-term view
- bring fresh perspectives from beyond the academy

Boards also can serve as a check by asking informed and pointed questions.

Board leadership on diversity can address all three of these challenges. First, boards can maintain sustained focus on a select few issues. They can establish a well-defined agenda and hold the administration accountable for progress on it. They can avoid being swept up in the immediate and urgent, and focus instead on the important—and remind campuses of what is important. Second, boards can adopt a long-term perspective. The very nature of governance demands that boards look far into the horizon. As Henry Rosovsky (1990) noted, “Trustees who understand their responsibilities are the best hope for the careful consideration of the long run” (p. 269). When presidents leave office, as they are bound to do, the board can hire a new leader with a continuity agenda in mind, keeping institutional attention focused over multiple administrations. Finally, boards—because they are comprised of informed and engaged individuals from outside the academy—can address the challenges of domain expertise identified by Almandoz and Tilscik by (1) lending new interpretations to ongoing data and insights; (2) serving as a check to overconfidence by asking informed, yet pointed, questions of administrators and faculty; and (3) bringing fresh eyes and perspectives from beyond the academy to illuminate and possibly reframe challenges.

We offer one important caveat to our thesis that boards can and should play a leadership role in advancing campus diversity. That is, they need to do so in partnership with administrators, faculty, and staff. Again, boards govern, not manage. The on-the-ground work of advancing campus diversity falls to administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Boards getting too far out in front of campus constituents or usurping the roles of senior administrators, faculty, and staff have the potential to create great disruption and high levels of risk. Boards rarely should get involved in operational issues, but they do need to maintain a carefully balanced presence, one that capitalizes on their relationships with administrators, faculty, and staff, and recognizes the skill and knowledge of these different groups.

The Problem of Many Problems

The challenges boards face in successfully advancing a diversity agenda are many. Some are directly related to the topic of race and diversity; others less directly so, yet they still very much impact the board's ability to effectively address these key issues. We discuss each challenge below.



Challenge: Boards themselves are not very diverse.

Direct challenges

Boards themselves struggle with diversity

One hurdle to boards advancing diversity may well be that boards themselves are not very diverse. According to the Association of Governing Boards (2016), minorities comprise 24 percent of public university and state system board members and just 13.5 percent of board members of private universities. Furthermore, when this study separated the trustees

of minority serving institutions (MSIs) from those of majority institutions, the numbers fell further, to 17 percent of non-MSI public colleges and universities and to 11 percent at private non-MSI institutions.³

The dearth of diverse board members is only part of the calculus here. Boards that adopt policies about diversity and practices concerning inclusion most likely improve their governance as well. Board diversity policies are “Those procedures adopted by boards with the intent to promote diversity” (Buse, Bernstein, & Bilimoria, 2013, p. 180). They may include diversity statements, policies and committees that focus on diversity and integration of diversity into the mission and values of the organization. Inclusive practices, on the other hand, “are the actions of board members that enable members from minority and marginalized communities to feel respected and engaged in governance” (Buse, Bernstein, & Bilimoria, 2013, p. 180). These include intragroup communication, access to information, and influence and power dynamics—practices that focus on the extent to which people feel included. All three elements—the demographic profile of the board (including gender as well as race), diversity policies, and inclusive practices—appear to affect overall board performance. Unfortunately, few university or system boards have taken such a focused approach to improve.

The issue of board diversity is well studied and equally contested in the governance literature. Most of the studies focus on corporate boards, with only a few on nonprofit boards. The questions most seem to be asking are to what extent or in what ways does diversity on boards affect various bottom lines, i.e., board performance and overall organizational performance? The research reflects different results, often dependent upon the definitions and methodologies used. Some studies find no positive impact, or even a negative impact, of racial/ethnic diversity on performance. Sometimes positive findings are explained away because of a lack of critical mass; other findings, both positive and negative, are linked to definitions of performance that may vary across studies (Rhode & Packel, 2014).

Still other studies find a positive correlation, particularly when racial/ethnic diversity is coupled with gender. For example, one study of nonprofit boards found that racial diversity by itself had a negative effect on organizational performance, and gender diversity has a positive effect. However, boards that had both racial and gender diversity have an even greater positive effect on performance than gender diversity alone. “The most interesting aspect of this analysis is that racial/ethnic diversity becomes a positive influence on external governance practices when there is greater gender diversity,” note Buse, Bernstein, and Bilimoria (2013, p. 186). The authors attributed this to the fact that “a board that has greater gender diversity has more effective governance practices and is more likely to have policies and practices related to diversity” (p. 187). They and others report that it is not

Inclusive board practices enable members from minority communities to feel respected and engaged in governance.

3. These numbers are similar to the demographics of other nonprofit boards in which minority trustees account for 20 percent of board members, an increase from 16 percent in 2010 (BoardSource, 2015). Corporate boards also are similarly composed with 15 percent minority among the largest 200 S & P 500 companies (Spencer Stuart, 2015).



Board diversity requires attention to board culture, climate and practices.

enough to have racial/ethnic diversity on the board, but rather boards benefit when they create cultures of inclusion, and operationalize those cultures through policy and practice. In short, board diversity isn't simply a numbers game. It takes attention to board culture, climate, and practices to make a positive difference.

Such research is difficult to act upon readily because even the studies that show positive correlations are unsure of causality (Rhode & Packel, 2014). Do diverse boards perform better or are better boards able to recruit and benefit from more diverse members? At the end of her study of nonprofit university boards, Harris (2014) noted "it is possible, however, that directors with specific characteristics are drawn to better performing boards" (p. 127).

What has not been studied is the relationship between board diversity and advancing campus diversity agendas or other types of institutional priorities. We might speculate that more diverse boards, particularly those that have adopted diversity policies and inclusive practices in the boardroom, might extend these elements to the work they do on behalf of the campus, including considering more diverse candidates for presidencies.

Furthermore, one could argue that boardroom diversity and inclusive practices help to foster a greater sense of trust in the boardroom, as well as constructive social dynamics between board members, which facilitates work on the complex topic of diversity. After all, "what distinguishes exemplary boards is that they are robust, effective social systems" (Sonnenfeld, 2002, p. 108). The consulting firm, McKinsey & Co. noted in a recent report on high-performing boards that "the boards that are most effective and well-rounded also have the strongest board dynamics. In a healthy boardroom, a culture of trust and respect is vital. But so is an environment where directors and company leaders challenge each other." (Kehoe, Lund, & Speilmann, 2016). Inclusive practices among diverse board members may help promote this type of engagement.

Challenges framing the issues

Although many people agree with Charles Kettering's view that, "A problem well stated is a problem half-solved," doing so is easier said than done. Stating a problem necessarily involves determining the frame, or lens, through which the problem is seen. By "frame" we mean how an issue is situated in a larger context. Framing is important because how we frame issues determines, in a big way, the solutions we see.

Consider any campus issue from binge drinking⁴ (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014) to sexual assault⁵ (Not Alone, 2014) to fraternity hazing practices (Bolen, 2013; Kinkade, 2015; Reitman, 2012). How issues are framed determines solutions applied and outcomes derived (at least to an extent; some outcomes are unpredictable because people are unpredictable). For example, framing binge drinking as a parental issue of over-coddling and constant monitoring (Flanagan, 2016), which in turn causes kids to go “wild” in college (not having learned to drink responsibly), leads to “fix-the-parent” approaches like education and counseling. If the issue is framed as a campus issue (Carey, 2014), you might expect to see faculty assigning more homework, curbs on the Greek system, and early classes on Thursday and Friday mornings. Framed as a community issue, you might not see local bars offering 25-cent drink specials and \$1 pitchers of beer (Carey, 2014). And when binge drinking is framed as a possible pre-cursor for sexual assault, some campuses train students to look out for each other in risky situations (Wilson, 2014).

Moving to race, a strong case has been made (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016) that diversity programs in corporate America have failed largely because of improper framing. Programs from the 1960s such as diversity training to reduce bias on the job; hiring tests and performance ratings to limit bias in recruitment and promotions; and grievance systems to allow employees a way to challenge managers are “tools to preempt lawsuits by policing managers’ thoughts and actions.” People who undergo mandatory diversity training rarely actually shed their biases, and any positive effects have been shown to last only a day or two. Blaming and shaming does not work—no surprise there! In fact, quite the contrary: such approaches may actually exacerbate the problem because people become defensive and backlash can occur. The issue is largely with the framing. Research has shown that when the focus of training is largely about avoiding lawsuits, backlash is more likely to occur; when training is reframed as voluntary, and undertaken to advance a company’s business goals, it was associated with increased diversity in management (that is, increased hiring of diverse candidates) (Rynes & Rosen, 1995). Rynes and Rosen argue that companies get better results when they “ease up on control tactics” and instead engage managers in solving the problem (and, we would argue, first defining the issue); increase their on-the-job contact with female and minority workers; and promote social accountability, i.e., the desire to look fair-minded.

Diversity programs in corporate America have failed largely because of improper framing.

Research shows companies get better results when they “ease up on control tactics” and engage managers in solving the problem.

4. More than 1,800 students die every year from alcohol-related causes. An additional 600,000 are injured while drunk, and nearly 100,000 become victims of alcohol-influenced sexual assaults. One in four say their academic performance has suffered from drinking, all according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2014, p. 10).
5. One in five college students experiences sexual assault during their college career. Most often, it’s by someone she knows—and also most often, she does not report what happened. Many survivors are left feeling isolated, ashamed or to blame. Men, too, are victims of sexual assault, although less often than women (Not Alone, 2014, p. 2).

Institutionalized racism has been a part of the history of many colleges and universities—and in many ways informs the present.

Racism

Racism is a difficult and challenging conversation topic, yet discussions of diversity and equity in higher education often downplay or even ignore this fact. Harper (2012) reviewed 225 academic studies over ten years that focused on race and included minority students and faculty and administrators, as well as comparisons of majority and minority colleges and universities. He concluded that the findings of these studies “make clear that most higher education researchers have attempted to take account of racial differences in college access and student outcomes, as well as in racially dissimilar experiences of Whites and minoritized persons, without considering how racist institutional practices undermine equity and diversity” (p. 22).

Noted sociologist Joe Feagin, when asked in a *New York Times* interview if we can talk about race in America without talking about racism replied simply, “No, we cannot.” (Yancy & Feagin, 2015). Feagin argued that “major racial inequities have been deeply institutionalized over about 20 generations,” or roughly about 80 percent of America’s four-century history. Further, these inequities have been and continue to be “socially reproduced by individuals and groups” in ways that the majority are often unaware.

Racism can be defined “as individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity; and institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons (Harper, 2012, p 10).

Institutionalized racism has been a part of the history of many colleges and universities—and that history in many ways informs the present. The recent announcement by Georgetown University regarding its historical connections to slavery is a clear and strong example. The University’s report notes, “Beginning with deliberations in the 1780s over the founding of an academy and until the end of the Civil War, Georgetown University’s origins and growth, and successes and failures, can be linked to America’s slave-holding economy and culture.” (Georgetown University, 2016, p. 12)

The difficulties of talking about race

Over a few weeks leading up to writing this essay, we asked informally a fairly wide cross-section of Whites and persons of color how they feel when asked to talk about race. Answers: Exposed. Vulnerable. Guilty. Ashamed. Uncomfortable. Embarrassed. Intimidated. Frustrated. Threatened. Embittered. Angry.

None of these are good feelings, but they are honest expressions of how some people feel. Naturally, context matters—some said how they feel would depend on the circumstances of the conversation and who else was in the room. And so we added, “Imagine you’re in a boardroom, in the context of a board meeting, where there are trustees, staff members, perhaps some students and faculty.” Many of the same words were used and others added: awkward, hesitant, guarded, wary.

While clearly not a scientific poll or random sample, the sentiments raised in our informal poll are revealing. A scan of popular press articles in *The Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, and the *Huffington Post* confirm these informal findings: It is difficult to talk about race because it feels awkward and people are inexperienced. To most of us, particularly Whites, race is “an uncomfortable topic. And when we do talk about race, it’s usually with people who look like us. But having that intimate conversation without people from other backgrounds and races doesn’t leave room to build empathy or gain a different perspective, much less actually listen” (Vasilogambros, 2015).

A *Huffington Post* blog entitled “Why It’s So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism,” (DiAngelo, 2015) noted:

Any white person living in the United States will develop opinions about race simply by swimming in the water of our culture. But mainstream sources—schools, textbooks, media—don’t provide us with the multiple perspectives we need. Yes, we will develop strong emotionally laden opinions, but they will not be informed opinions. Our socialization renders us racially illiterate. When you add a lack of humility (because we don’t know what we don’t know), you get the break-down we often see when trying to engage white people in meaningful conversations about race.

Political reporter Matt Bai wrote in a piece called “Race: Still Too Hot to Touch” (*New York Times*, July 24, 2010) that “anyone who even tries to talk about race risks public outrage and humiliation.” He continued by saying that many hoped that the election of a Black president whose campaign was about hope would “make the subject less sensitive and volatile,” and characterized the all “too familiar elements of racial dysfunction in the society: bigotry and hypersensitivity, gross distortions and moralizing.” Is it any wonder why boards do not want to go there?



Talking about race without people from other backgrounds and races doesn’t leave room to build empathy or gain a different perspective.

Indirect challenges

Lack of sophisticated understanding of student and faculty issues

Many boards struggle with understanding student and faculty issues. Often the two board committees most adrift in terms of their purpose and focus are the academic and student affairs committees, as the subjects they address tend not to be as clear-cut or familiar to board members as the work conducted by the audit or finance committees. For example, many boards tussle with the appropriate level of oversight of student learning outcomes—an area of faculty work often contested by the faculty themselves. Thus, trustees tend to tread lightly, if at all, into what might be an institutional mine field. Often, boards also are unfamiliar with the terminology and methodologies related to student outcomes. Finally, boards are sometimes unsure of their role in this realm given that faculty are the primary party responsible for teaching and learning (AGB No Author, 2014).

Challenge: Given that their professional background is most often corporate, many trustees struggle with understanding student and faculty issues.

Given that the professional background of most trustees is corporate (AGB, 2016), it is not surprising that concepts such as student development, academic freedom, faculty professional authority, departmental autonomy, and loose coupling are foreign to most board members (see for instance, March, 1994; Mintzberg, 1993; Julius, Baldrige, & Pfeffer, 1999). But the concepts are well ingrained in the academy, and require extensive explanation for boards to understand their effects and implications. As former president Donald Walker wrote, “If there is an issue at hand that the faculty cares deeply about and you [as an administrator] can’t persuade them, you certainly can’t bulldoze them.” (1979, p. 10). And yet many corporate leaders who serve on boards have found success in the business realm in part because of their bulldozing capacity.

Finally, some boards may interact very little with faculty or students in meaningful and substantive ways. Admonitions to “keep out” of the “campus work” mean that some boards tend to be disconnected from the daily experiences of faculty and students. Yet some boards become too deeply involved, trending towards micromanaging. An appropriate balance is difficult to achieve given the problems created by overzealous or over-engaged boards. Disengagement can be problematic, too, as some observers rightfully ask, “Where was the board on that issue?”

Ineffective use of data and dashboards

Many boards fail to use relevant data and wonder about the appropriate level of dashboards and metrics. Together, data and dashboards are the guideposts by which boards direct and steer the institution. Dashboards can be powerful tools for university boards (Allen, Bacow, & Trombley, 2011): they can help boards focus on high-level performance indicators, inform decisions, and chart progress on strategic priorities. Yet, some boards struggle with using them well.

One problem is that boards tend to use dashboards episodically rather than regularly. Some boards and administrators turn to dashboards only when they remember them, or need them to make a point, rather than build their review into board meeting routines on an annual basis. They also may grapple with consistency of dashboard measures. For example, one president annually used rankings as a dashboard. The problem, beyond the methodological challenges of rankings themselves, was that she used rankings from different providers each year. Dashboards should not be re-created each time the board uses them; rather a set of indicators should be agreed upon and tracked over time.

Second, some data are more amenable to dashboards than other data. Financial and enrollment data lend themselves well to board dashboards; however, issues such as student learning or campus climate are more difficult to capture and display succinctly and meaningfully. The adage that not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts is certainly appropriate here.

Third, getting the right level of data is essential. Data too deep or narrow can lead to micromanaging and can be completely overwhelming in sheer volume. Conversely, data that is overly broad can be meaningless. Finally, there is a difference between the data and dashboards that management needs, and that which is appropriate for the board. Management data tends to be more detailed and nuanced, and reflects shorter time horizons.

Too many competing issues

Higher education is a complex enterprise and boards have a significant number of serious issues to address in relatively short and structured time periods. Most private college and university boards meet only three or four times each year. Public boards meet more often, but have fewer trustees to share the heavy governance load. Stealing minutes tends to be a way of operating for many boards. Some boards have a culture predisposed toward efficiency, thus making time for new topics—even controversial topics that would seem to demand their attention—is challenging.

Boards that lack savvy and organized chairs and an effective committee structure often struggle to get through their docket of agenda items. Thus, diversity issues may be addressed only episodically rather than with a sustained focus.

A lack of confidence by key stakeholders

Boards may be ineffectual around advancing diversity issues because the board is perceived to be ineffective on many issues. Trustees—the fiduciaries of the institution—need to rely on more than just their legal standing to be positively influential. Boards that are perceived as lacking sophistication, or as unknowledgeable about higher education, particularly by the faculty, will not be able to drive much progress.

Challenge: Boards perceived as lacking sophistication, or unknowledgeable about higher education, **will not be able to drive much progress.**

Further, too many boards are in the media for the wrong reasons and on a good day are mediocre at best (Trower & Eckel, 2016). This underperformance does little to garner the support and confidence of faculty, policymakers, or students and their families. A board struggling with conflicts of interest, intra-board disputes, disagreements with the president, or failed oversight lacks solid footing from which to act and does not inspire confidence from key stakeholders. Why should anyone pay attention to their pronouncements when they themselves are not functioning well?

A Need to Redefine Board Work

Many boards see their work as responding to pre-determined and well-stated problems presented to them pre-packaged by the administration. In these scenarios, they can readily look to their governance toolbox for solutions to apply to what Heifetz (1994) calls “technical problems.” These issues should be differentiated, however, from more nettlesome “adaptive challenges,” which include diversity. Each type is depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Differences between technical problems and adaptive challenges	
Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
Easy to spot	Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
‘Know-how’ exists; someone has “the answer”	There is no right answer
Can be solved by management	Require different lenses/multiple stakeholders
Solutions can be implemented quickly, by edict	“Solutions” take time, not by edict
People are receptive to technical solutions	People often resist even acknowledging
Changes have simple boundaries	Changes cut across boundaries; complex
Can be fixed solo	Require collaboration and learning
Have tools and experience necessary to solve	Needed responses are outside repertoire

Table 2 contrasts technical problems versus adaptive challenges relevant to higher education.

Table 2: Technical problems and related adaptive challenges	
Technical Problems	Adaptive Challenges
Enrollment declining	Value proposition
Fundraising down	Mission no longer resonates?
Faculty salaries	Faculty morale
Faculty turnover	Workplace culture
Website usage down	Message no longer resonates?
Diversity rates low	Equity and inclusion

Noting the last pair, at its quantitative level, diversity can be seen as a technical problem—it's straightforward to know when the numbers are lacking, and diverse faculty and staff can be hired and diverse students can be accepted. But if the institution's culture is not equitable and inclusive, what often happens is that diverse people leave (the revolving door syndrome). What good is a seat at the table if you have no voice? The adaptive challenge is to ensure that there is equity and inclusion for diverse people.

Because adaptive challenges are exacerbated by attempted technical fixes, boards—along with the administration—are well-served by teasing out the technical from the adaptive, and recognizing that there is enormous pressure on presidents to treat ambiguous, complex issues as if they are technical problems. A president once lamented that his board wanted “30-second answers to 20-minute questions.” Leaders must resist the temptation to seek authoritative and absolute “right” answers. If any are found, they are almost certainly solutions to technical problems, not adaptive challenges.

Strategies to pursue

Boards should play a leadership role in advancing campus diversity, but they face many obstacles to doing it well. We offer a set of strategies⁶ to address typical shortcomings and make progress on this important and perennial challenge. Boards must first make a commitment to playing an enhanced role on this matter. Second, they must develop the capacity to act. Third, they must assess their efficacy. Specific actions that boards can take are outlined below.

Accept ownership and name the issues

Boards, as fiduciaries, are the ultimate decision makers and have legal authority for the institution, its well-being, and that of its students and employees. To carry out this responsibility with respect to diversity, the experience of minority students (and faculty and staff), equity, and a culture of inclusion, boards should accept ownership of the issues. Boards set the tone at the top for what is important, and translate the pressures and expectations of the broader world into priorities for the campus, while both advancing and safeguarding its mission.

Boards play a central role in discerning and making sense of what is happening in the world, as they collaborate with leadership to find and frame problems and opportunities (Trower, 2013). Defining the problem is essential board work that is often overlooked. Because situations can have many interpretations, this initial discernment and sensemaking guides action.

Boards set the tone for what is important and translate the expectations of the broader world into priorities for the campus, while both advancing and safeguarding its mission.

6. Some of the ideas presented here were first presented in Eckel and Trower, (2015). Diversity is not a spectator sport: The role boards play in racial debates on campuses. *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/11/17/role-boards-play-racial-debates-campusessay>.

Trustees should think about the campus culture they want to build, and the values they hold dearest and want to preserve.

Boards can address diversity and equity as its own agenda item, but they can also frame aspects of diversity and equity as a thread that extends throughout their board work. As discussed in the introduction, diversity is about mission, students, academics, finance, and strategy. It is reasonable to expect diversity and equity to surface in all of these areas of board work if boards only look for it.

How the board chooses to frame the issue (or sets of issues) determines where and when they appear and how much attention they receive. One of the most essential roles a board can play is to help “see around corners” (Hook, 2010 quoting Colin Powell) to anticipate opportunities, but boards also must be able to spot problems. Finding and framing the right problems at the right time is essential board work.

Define success and set goals

The board, working with campus leaders, should “Describe what success on diversity goals looks like” (Taylor, Milem, & Coleman 2016, p. 16) and “clearly articulate the institution’s unique, broad-based diversity goals, with a direct connection to institutional mission and the research-based benefits associated with student diversity” (p. 11). This action requires two steps: (1) to define what success looks like, and (2) to set goals. A third part is to expect progress and to monitor it. Doing so will pave the way toward accomplishing the next strategy.

Build the campus culture by design, not default

Because values matter so much in the academy, trustees, in their dialogues with key stakeholders, should always think about the campus culture they want to build, and the values they hold dearest and want to perpetuate. Those values should be pervasive throughout the campus (part of its ethos)—so embedded in the culture that they define all interactions and are defended at all costs. Boards should spend time learning how students experience the campus climate and culture, what shapes the student experience, and whether the experiences differ across diverse groups and individuals.

A few catalytic questions help boards think through their institutions’ values, including:

- What adjectives best describe our institution’s culture at present? What adjectives would we most like to describe our culture?
- If we were to start a new branch campus, what institutional core values would we ensure are embedded there?
 - What will our institution *always* do (or always stand for)?
 - What will our institution *never* do?

- What do we do that's good for mission, but not necessarily for business?
- What do we do that's good for business, but not necessarily for mission?
- If we are what we do, who are we?
- What do we do that peers could/would not do and why?
- What do peers do that we could/would not do and why?

Discussing these questions helps the board and administration think about the prevailing culture and values, and become intentional about what is and what could be. Engaging with faculty and students on these matters is also a good idea and can be quite productive and informative.

Recognize conflict in inevitable

Issues of race and equity are rarely addressed simply, in rational terms. They encompass issues of identity, personal experience, and racism. They are societal, generational and longstanding. As we discussed earlier in this essay, such work will bring people together in ways that easily can become uncomfortable and heated. The art of engaging in discussions that allow emotions and conflict to surface constructively, but not become disruptive, is extremely difficult.

Additionally, issues of diversity and equity often exist at the intersection between competing priorities and values. For example, campuses may experience conflict when the rights or needs of one group come into conflict with the rights or needs of another group. Boards must recognize such tensions and work through them, rather than try to ignore them or attempt to bulldoze through the conflicts that inevitably arise.

Diversify themselves

As pointed out above, boards of predominately White institutions are not ethnically and racially diverse. (They tend to lack gender diversity as well for that matter.) Boards should increase their representation of minorities and women, including minority women. Having a more diverse board can help improve governance, as research cited above shows. It can also create new dynamics within the board to help address potentially controversial issues. Efforts to increase board diversity also send an important message to the campus and external stakeholders about board priorities.



Issues of diversity and equity often exist at the intersection between competing priorities and values.

Simply adding diverse board members, however, is insufficient, as noted previously. Boards that also adopt diversity and inclusion practices govern better than boards that do not. Boards should develop statements on diversity, and implement policies and committees on diversity and inclusion. Inclusive practices include efforts to ensure that minority voices are drawn out and not overshadowed, that positions of board leadership are diverse and representative, and that seats on influential committees are open to minority board members. (For example, is the finance committee all White males?)

The adoption of such practices and policies may also go a long way toward preventing a revolving door of minority board membership. Women or people of color who feel excluded from board work, or who do not think their contributions are acknowledged or well received, may choose to take their talents, time, and treasure elsewhere. The result may well be a continued turnover of minority trustees. Inclusive practices may help reverse such trends.

Use diversity-specific data and dashboards

As mentioned above, boards often struggle with finding the right data and using them consistently, particularly outside of financial data. To advance diversity, boards should expect meaningful data related to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic diversity, including: What are the trends related to enrollment, persistence and graduation? Is there more granular data that might be helpful in identifying meaningful trends? For example, in what degree programs are students of different race and ethnicity enrolling? How well are different demographics of students progressing across these various degree programs? For instance, are White students succeeding in STEM at different rates than minority students? Does a higher percentage of minority students leave after their junior year compared to other types of students? Or do they not return as sophomores at different rates than majority students? What about admissions and yield patterns by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status? The board should identify key data and then ask for and discuss three- or five-year trends.

Boards should expect meaningful trend data related to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic diversity. Campus climate studies can yield keen insights as well.

Another type of data to collect is related to campus climate. This undertaking is different than asking for runs of data that the institution already has. Its methodologies often include surveys, focus groups and interviews. Climate studies may be a significant undertaking, yet can yield keen insights because they allow personal stories to be revealed; by doing so, they help leaders understand the actual experience of students, faculty and staff in ways that numbers alone cannot.

Become more comfortable talking about race

Individual trustees and boards as a whole need to become practiced and more comfortable talking about race and equality. The Anne E. Casey Foundation offers some suggestions (2006):

- Stress values and priorities that unite rather than divide (We want all of our students to succeed so why are some students doing less well than others?);
- Bundle problems with solutions;

- Focus on situations that all people can relate to (We can't saddle our students with debt and those who drop out are going to struggle to pay off their loans. We are not retaining minority males at the same rates as other students.);
- Use metaphors that offer insights to complex issues (It's like starting a race from 15 yards behind, for example.);
- Center on "what's to blame" (the cause), rather than who is to blame; and
- Avoid purporting numbers by themselves without a narrative, or some people may simply argue against the numbers and not respond to their meaning and implications.

Engage students, faculty and staff

Trustees should find ways to understand the student and faculty experience by listening to and engaging with students and faculty. Creating bridges between the board and the campus may be more important now than it has been in the last decade. This work may be as much about listening as action. Trustees, however, tend to be most comfortable in a problem-solving mode rather than an active-listening mode, but their institutions may be better served if they simply engage. Trustees need to be good listeners, withhold quick judgment, and resist the urge to act immediately. Moving too fast to solutions without understanding the nuance of the issues may create a short-term sense of progress, but create more significant challenges in the future. Finally, boards' traditional mode of governing at arms length from the campus may need to be revised, while setting clear expectations about how to avoid being inappropriately intrusive into the daily life of the campus.

Hold the president accountable and assign responsibility

A primary responsibility of boards is to ensure progress on institutional goals; they do so by holding the president accountable. In turn, the board should be assured that the president is holding his/her leadership team and the faculty accountable for progress as well. Boards should ask for and expect progress on milestones and goals related to diversity. By being explicit about their expectations, the board sends an important signal that it too cares about diversity over the long term. That said, any new priorities must work in concert with other presidential priorities. A constantly changing set of priorities does little to advance the institution or provide an effective North Star for progress, and unrealistic priorities and demands can undermine president-board relations. Consistency matters, but it should be tempered by an appropriate sense of urgency.

Support the president

When facing difficult and challenging issues, boards need to play multiple roles. An essential role for boards is to lend personal and professional support to presidents when facing difficult situations. Many presidents have and will come under fire for lack of perceived progress on objectives related to diversity and equity. While some deserve the criticisms



Boards should ask for and expect progress on milestones and goals related to diversity.

they receive, others are and have been working diligently on this agenda. Given the sense of frustration on many campuses, the way forward is often unclear, and there is no roadmap to consult. Board support of presidents as they forge the new way forward can help ensure progress.

Acknowledge complexity

Change in the academy often seems slow, much to the frustration of some trustees. Moving any agenda forward expeditiously in the academy is difficult and even more so when those agendas are complex, if not contentious. The issues of diversity, equity and inclusion are adaptive challenges, not technical problems, meaning that there are no quick fixes and even clearly right answers (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky 2009). Treating these issues as technical problems to apply a tried solution may only exacerbate them. Instead, the board must work with the president, staff, faculty and students to examine the issues, acknowledge the complexity of views of multiple stakeholders, think critically about them, define what can be done, and take steps forward—in some cases boldly, and on others more incrementally.

Ensure a comprehensive diversity strategy

In addition to the need to understand current and emergent issues surrounding higher education, boards should ensure that the institution has an intentional plan to address campus diversity, equity and inclusion—for students, faculty, and staff. Questions to ask include: Is the plan appropriate? Does it address the right elements? Is it consistent with other institutional goals and priorities, such as those outlined in the strategic plan? Are the milestones and metrics sensible? How realistic is the timeline? Does it clarify who is responsible for what?



It is crucial that institutions be proactive in attending to social media. Boards can ensure a social media monitoring and response strategy is in place.

Attend to social media

The community of a campus is no longer constrained to its physical borders or to the hours of a traditional workday. Social media means that issues are discussed, expressed and inflamed in the physical and virtual worlds. It is crucial that institutions be proactive in attending to social media; an important component of that approach is to ensure that there is a social media monitoring and response strategy. How are the institution and the board monitoring social media? What are the means of communication that the board should pursue or try to downplay? What are the priority outlets where the board and institution should focus their attention? How agile can the media strategies be if the platforms shift, from say Twitter to Instagram? Who should respond/tweet/post on behalf of the board?

Discuss lessons learned from trustees' industries, fields, or sectors

Boards can and should be resources for their institutions and their leaders. Many trustees are highly effective leaders in their own industries and fields. They may have lessons and insights to share from outside of higher education that can help campus leaders. For

instance, many corporations and nonprofit organizations have made tremendous strides related to diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Others may have lessons to share from failed efforts that can also be illuminating. Boards should not shy away from serving as counselors when they have insights to share. At the same time, savvy boards know that not all ideas from corporate or other settings transfer smoothly into higher education—but discovering what applies well or not only happens through dialogue.

Conclusion

If there was ever a time when boards could be honorific, philanthropic, rubber stamps for management, it isn't now. As Drucker said to nonprofit CEOs, "You depend on the board, and therefore you can be more effective with a strong board, a committed board, an energetic board, than with a rubber stamp. The rubber stamp will, in the end, not stamp at all when you most need it." (p. 178).

Most institutions will benefit greatly from the board's imprimatur when it comes to efforts to advance diversity and equity. The challenges colleges, universities, and state systems face today are complex, marked by ongoing change and ambiguity. Responses to these challenges require that colleges and universities rethink their brand and marketing efforts, pursue alternative revenue streams, create ever-stronger fundraising capacity, seek new alliances and partnerships, develop stronger infrastructures including technology, and, in many cases, become more sophisticated in the political realm—all without losing sight of organizational mission and values, and constituent demands.

"Today, more than ever, consequential nonprofit governance requires engaged board members who truly partner with management—as stewards, strategists, and sense-makers—to skillfully lead their organizations into a future that will most certainly continue to change and evolve—one where mediocrity is not sustainable, and only the fittest and those with the greatest integrity will survive" (Trower, 2013, p. 216).

For our purposes here, integrity means addressing the complicated issues of diversity, equity and inclusion head on with deeply informed and sincere efforts. Many strategies currently being pursued simply are not working fast enough or running deep enough. For more than five decades, higher education leaders have noted the problems of inequity and the challenges of creating inclusive campuses. Yet, the challenge remains, seemingly intractable. Boards that possess the integrity, skill, commitment and know-how can lend immeasurably to their institutions' efforts to rise to meet it.

The board's stamp of approval is fundamental to institutional efforts to advance diversity and equity.

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