Getting the Boards Involved: Challenges and opportunities for equity at the highest level of university governance
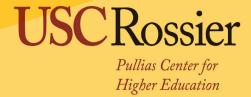
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Since 1995, the mission of the Pullias Center for Higher Education is to bring a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. Our work is devoted to the key issues of college access, retention, and accountability for underserved students—and the effectiveness of the colleges and universities that serve them. Both directly and through our research, we engage with institutional leaders, policymakers and the community at large to address the major challenges in educational equity today. For more information, please visit: https://pullias.usc.edu

Introduction

"In the end, it will be these governance partnerships that will determine not only who and who will not be involved in university decision making, but the very identity of the modern university itself. There is a choice confronting governments and policymakers and it is a choice about the future. Let us hope that it will be made wisely and let us hope that it will focus on the inclusion and participation of key players rather than their exclusion and marginalisation" (Kennedy, 2003, p. 68).

In response to increased calls for racial equity in higher education (Association of Governing Boards [AGB], 2020; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Dowd & Elmore, 2019; Iverson, 2007; Nishi, 2020; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013), colleges and universities utilize a range of initiatives to shape more diverse[1] and inclusive campuses (Iverson, 2007). However, institutions cannot address today's inequities without reconciling with the prejudiced and racist histories that bore the injustices. Complicating the efforts to achieve a more equitable and just future is an important, yet seldom addressed fact that higher education itself plays an integral role in the production of racism (Gerald & Haycock, 2006; Patton, 2016). Additionally, while scholarship puts forth the importance of leadership at all levels of organizations to advance goals, attend to the mission, and initiate change (Kezar et al., 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Wise et al., 2020), few studies give primary attention to the role of leadership in advancing equity in higher education (Kezar et al., 2021). Calls for higher education leaders to do more to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus, have largely disregarded governing boards—formally, the most powerful decision-making body on campus—in these discussions (Rall et al., 2018; 2020).

Despite being overlooked in equity-centered conversations, boards of trustees have an indispensable role to play in making colleges and universities more equitable.[2] Boards must enact this role not simply because they want to but because, as institutional fiduciaries, they are obligated to do so. Boards are important decision makers who some deem as the most strategic decision-making body on campus (Larsen, 2001). Further, the board has the position and influence to guide and shape institutional actions, priorities, policies, and operations and hold stakeholders accountable (Bensimon et al., 1989; Eckel & Kezar, 2011; Kezar et al., 2006; Ntim et al., 2017). Accordingly, higher education governance carries great weight not only for colleges and universities but governance actors such as trustees also transmit signals about their role and functions in broader society (Kennedy, 2003).

There are numerous opportunities and challenges that guide diversity and inclusion initiatives in alignment with social justice, educational, and business rationale (Williams, 2013). Unlike many approaches that often ignore, minimize, or question the board's role in effecting equity-centered change, however, it is important to recognize boards as essential initiators and catalysts in this area (Rall et al., 2020; Rall, 2021). Each board member can (and must) play a pivotal role in the

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1Diversity has become a buzz word in higher education and its meaning across campuses vary. It is beyond the scope of this report to offer a critique of the use of diversity, however, I use the word in this piece because it—along with equity and inclusion—is the common way racial, gender, socioeconomic, and other differences are referenced in higher education.

2Eyrich, T. (2020). Want to make college more equitable? Start with the board. University of California Riverside News. https://news.ucr.edu/articles/2020/01/30/want-make-college-more-equitable-start-board

equity conversation. The crux of this report reiterates something many have called out in recent years—we do not know enough about boards of higher education (Barringer & Riffe 2018; Bensimon, 1984; Kezar, 2006; Kezar & Eckel 2004), and we are only starting to scratch the surface as to how boards can have a specific influence on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in higher education (Rall et al., 2020).

Further investigation and remedial action by trustees both at the individual and collective levels is required. Only via an authentic, intentional, and comprehensive incorporation of equity-mindedness (Bensimon, 2007; Witham & Bensimon, 2012) can some meaningful change occur. But, as has been noted in other work, though some boards may recognize the need to play a role in race and DEI[3], they do not know how.[4] So, instead of merely offering an "inspiring" call to action for boards to enter the equity conversation, this report aims to elucidate some of the challenges and opportunities before the board so that trustees can better prepare to assume their role in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

Typical Board Approaches To DEI

Figuring out how to implement governance mechanisms that represent diverse stakeholders is a challenge of university governance (Wise et al., 2020). Too often, race, diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are reactive, emerging only in response to diversity crises (Williams, 2008). For example, in response to the recent murders of unarmed Black people across the nation at the hands of the police and a rise in Anti-Asian hate, institutions scurried to produce numerous reports, statements, articles, and recommendations to demonstrate support for racial equity and justice.[5] On the surface, nothing is inherently wrong with these approaches. In fact, "Governing boards should develop, ensure implementation of and advocate on behalf of a formal board policy statement on racial inclusion and opposition to systemic racism" (Brown et al., 2020, par 6), but a policy alone just will not cut it in today's climate. When equity efforts are merely reactionary, they tend to lack focus and continuity (Williams, 2008).

To demonstrate a commitment to DEI, some boards establish ad hoc or standing DEI committees[6] or focus on diversifying the board. Still, others indicate their commitment to DEI-related initiatives via the development of broad diversity agendas and policy statements (Iverson 2007; Kezar & Eckel 2008; Williams, 2013). High-level leaders often assemble "diversity" councils or committees to document the issues and then offer recommendations (Iverson, 2007). Although some boards release statements touting their commitment to justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion, researchers argue that the history of boards and their exclusionary practices are misaligned with these declarations (Glazer-Raymo, 2008; Rall et al., 2019; Rall & Orué, 2020). For example, many "diversity" and "inclusive" initiatives avoid addressing topics such as racism, and consequently, "our continued battle in diversity and Affirmative Action has been more of

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[3]Brown, C, Legon, R., & MacTaggart, T. (July, 2020). It's Time for Governing Boards to Weigh In on Race. https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/07/10/college-governing-boards-must-weigh-meaningfully-race#backtotop

[4]Rall, R.M. (October, 2020). It's Time for Governing Boards to Weigh In on Race…But they don't Know How. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/print/views/ 2020/10/22/governing-boards-should-weigh-racial-issues-dont-know-how-opinion

[5]An example: https://www.pugetsound.edu/about/diversity-at-puget-sound/statement-against-racism-discrimination/

[6]Princeton has a board standing committee on diversity: https://www.princeton.edu/news/2016/04/04/trustees-call-expanded-commit-ment-diversity-and-inclusion

the same" (Nishi, 2020, p. 15). In other cases, some DEI agendas and initiatives are poorly conceived and misguided (Milem et al., 2005). In either case, when DEI initiatives are principally symbolic, they fail to influence and change behaviors and cultures (Williams et al., 2005). Regardless of the approach, boards seldom recognize and undertake intentional and reflective actions in recognition that an organizational shift is essential to produce and maintain an effective DEI agenda (Adserias et al., 2017).

Ideal Board Approaches to DEI

Ideal board approaches to DEI are intentional and not merely reactive. They are comprehensive, and not compartmentalized. They synergistically leverage all campus decision-makers and recognize that equity is not counter to other institutional aims (Rall et al., 2020). These approaches center equity to address the racialized policies, procedures, and structures that perpetuate inequities (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Equity mindedness (Bensimon et al., 2016) and culturally sustaining governance (Rall et al., 2020) are critical lenses that can be applied to all aspects of board work. Equity-centered decision-making prioritizes critical and collaborative inquiry to shift trustees from being on the sidelines of equity work to active contributors in higher education (Rall et al., 2020).

Boards have recently seen themselves in more of the spotlight due to issues of sexual assault, admissions, and tenure review scandals and accordingly, trustees have had to assume more active roles.[7] This type of increased engagement is necessary to address issues of inequity in higher education as well. Inquiry alone may not bring about equity (Dowd & Elmore, 2019). Boards can no longer be "invisible" key factors in diversity planning on campuses (Wilson, 2016). In order to do more proactive, intentional, and transformational work around diversity, equity, and inclusion, this section outlines a series of opportunities (strategies or practices) that boards can implement to address challenges related to equity. I highlight how an attention to equity and justice is necessary at all stages of decision making in higher education (Posselt et al., 2019), particularly at the level of the board.

Equity Audit (Assess Where You Are As A Board)

Challenge

Structural diversity (the number/representation of individuals from diverse backgrounds) often receives institutional focus instead of the historical legacies of exclusion (Hurtado et al., 2012). So, while disparities in representation are acknowledged, boards and other decision-makers seldom question how these inequities were created (Milem et al., 2005). Emphasis on structural racism, the systematic but frequently invisible manner in which routine practices, traditions, values, and structures maintain racial inequity in the sphere of higher education, has been noticeably absent (Bensimon & Bishop, 2012). Unfortunately, boards have taken the approach that views "diversity as an end itself" rather than as...[a] process that – when properly implemented – has the potential to enhance many important ...outcomes' (Milem et al., 2005, p.16). Despite popular rhetoric that labels

[7]Marcus, J. (April, 2015). Once invisible, college boards of trustees are suddenly in the spotlight. https://hechingerreport.org/once-invisible-college-boards-of-trustees-are-suddenly-in-the-spotlight/

higher education as a great equalizer, higher education has been "a primary force in persistent inequities" (Patton, 2016, p. 318). Without acknowledging the role that institutions play in perpetuating inequity, any efforts to change the status quo may fall flat. Institutions and the boards that help govern them, have to be shepherded to a more comprehensive awareness about their own role in reproducing disparities (Hurtado et al., 2012).

The struggle for equity in higher education is closely tied to leadership (Astin & Astin, 2015). Any decision-making enacted without engaging in necessary dialogue around issues of race, racism, bias, exclusion, discrimination, inequity, etc. will be incomplete. Color evasive (Annamma et al., 2017) approaches to governing higher education will be ineffectual. Often, despite best intentions, board members may fear engaging in this space for fear of saying the wrong thing, being viewed in a negative light, or feeling guilty. The work is further complicated because there are no cookie cutter strategies for improving DEI and dismantling systemic oppression; nuance of institutional history, identity, mission, and other characteristics should necessarily be considered (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Opportunity

Strategies to address equity should be preceded by equity audits that reveal the current state of the institution (Rice, 2004). The utility of equity audits has origins in the areas of civil rights, curriculum auditing, and state accountability policy systems (Skrla, 2004). An equity audit may enhance trustees' understandings of how the pervasiveness of inequity in postsecondary education is often unclear and consider how the uncertainty of such data may maintain the status quo (Groenke, 2010). Through the performance of the equity audit, trustees may begin to see and understand how inequity operates within their institutions and start to feel empowered to critique these inequities and ultimately address them (Groenke, 2010). Boards can use equity audits to reveal palatable data which can subsequently be used for planning institutional change (Skrla, 2004).

Example Board Actions:

- ✓ Integrate board evaluations on a more regular basis. Make time to interrogate the responses to questions around board culture, access, inclusion, diversity, and equity.
- ✓ Engage in conversation around areas where some board members may feel excluded and consider the ways in which the board may be acting as a barrier or inhibitor to board work through the perpetuation of inequitable practices. Consider leveraging an outside entity or tool to help facilitate this process.

Questions for the Board:

- ✓ What does equity mean for your campus? What does equity mean for your board?
- ✓ When is the last time you questioned business as usual in your actions and roles as board members?
- ✓ Do you understand, value, desire, and actualize equity as a board?
- ✓ Are you asking for disaggregated data that gives you information to compare within and across groups over time?

Representational Equity (Board Composition)

Challenge

The composition of governing boards remains one of the most inequitable decision-making entities in higher education (Bustillos & Siqueiros, 2018; Rall et al., 2018). Improving board diversity continues to be an elusive challenge in higher education (Rall & Orué, 2020). The academy—its students, staff, faculty, leadership—is overwhelmingly white. Boards, too, remain majority white (Schwartz, 2010; AGB, 2016). Boards of public and private institutions lack racial and ethnic diversity. 87.5% of trustees at private institutions and 74.3% of trustees at public institutions are white (AGB, 2016). These figures stand in stark contrast to the diversity found across university and college campuses, where students of color make up 45.2% of the undergraduate body and 32% of graduate students (AGB, 2016). Indeed, the demographics of board members are not changing on boards across U.S. higher education in pace with the changing demographics of the nation and higher education at large (AGB, 2016; Commodore et al., 2018; Masterson, 2009).

Lack of diversity in the composition is a prominent feature of higher education boards; greater demographic diversity is required to mirror progressively diverse student populations (Chun, 2017). And while diversification alone will not address all DEI shortfalls, board member heterogeneity is critical to diversity leadership (Chun & Evans, 2009). It is important that governing boards are composed of those equipped to grapple with the complexities of diversity that will surely arrive on our institutions' doorsteps (Wilson, 2016).

Opportunity

Like other groups, boards that are demographically diverse have the potential to establish strong decision-making interactions (Elsass & Graves, 1997) and facilitate greater numerical diversity at lower levels of university control (Ehrenberg & Main, 2009). Data on board diversity (e.g., Schwartz, 2010) indicate that trustees are well-positioned to wield considerable influence on universities, both as it relates to determining internal goals, policies, processes, and outcomes as well as with regard to engaging external stakeholders to benefit from opportunities, forge new connections, or buffer against threats in the external environment (Birnbaum, 1992; Rabovsky & Rutherford, 2016). The AGB 2020 Trustee Index: Concern Deepens for the Future of Higher Education notes that "One tangible way for trustees to become more in tune with those they serve is to increase diversity on their boards" (p. 15). With boards having to make such important decisions, they must not only be functional but also effective. Literature suggests that diversity is essential for an effective board and, therefore, should characterize the composition of boards (Kohn & Mortimer, 1983; Kramer et al., 2006).

Part of the reason boards are not diverse is, as Iverson (2007) states, "A university's diversity action plan may construct a world for racial minorities that disqualifies them from participation, even as it strives to include them as full participants" (p. 592). Said differently, it is important to interrogate recruitment, selection, and appointment processes that have historically limited the representation of "other" voices on the board. In addition to addressing restrictive access to the board, it is important to also think about what representation means for the individuals on the board. Therefore, instead of focusing solely on numerical representation, it may also be beneficial for historically marginalized populations on the board to reach a critical mass (Kanter, 1977) so that

there is diversity within diversity (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). A representational critical mass may help minimize tokenization and stereotyping of certain groups (Park & Liu, 2014) and help to address the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility that marginalized groups experience on the board. Critical mass of marginalized groups will help the boards to realize the decision-making benefits of these numbers (Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003). More research is necessary to identify the optimal representational levels (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Example Board Actions:
- ✓ Embed questions about equity and a vision for equitable practices in presidential and senior-level selection processes.
- ✓ Make it a top priority to retain senior-leaders that demonstrate a commitment to and an impact on an equity-focused strategic plan

Questions to Pose:
- ✓ What does board recruitment and onboarding look like?
- ✓ Are there opportunities for cohort-based onboarding processes? How can the board contribute to a diverse pipeline of board member prospects?

Making Changes In Isolation

Challenge:

Another limitation to more extensive progress in DEI is that innovations and initiatives are often imagined and realized in isolation, so that they lack cohesion, coherence, and collaboration (Milem et al., 2005). No one decision-making authority can single-handedly implement the diversity agenda; advancing equity requires team leadership (Kezar et al., 2021; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017) yet trustees are too often left out of the "team" of faculty, staff, and administrators that can produce better equity-related outcomes. In addition to having initiatives distinct from other campus stakeholders, board members often relegate DEI work to the margins. Instead of making equity the agenda, boards often use an ad hoc or standing committee to take on equity work. Instead of recognizing equity as an integral consideration to all board action, boards often have equity as a distinct conversation set apart from major decisions.

Opportunity:

A commitment to equity will be limited if that commitment does not permeate the organization's broader culture and day-to-day work. Therefore, trustees should work in conjunction with the full range of senior-level decision-makers that are integral to transformational change in higher education including deans, provosts, presidents/chancellors, and other administrators like chief diversity officers (Kezar, 2007, 2008; Kezar & Eckel, 2013; Kezar et al., 2006, 2008; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013). Just as presidents are not the only decision-makers on campus (Birnbaum, 1992); trustees must also establish ways to align and partner with faculty, students, and staff to advance the equity and

diversity agenda using strategies that align with the academic culture (Kezar et al., 2011; Williams, 2013; Williams & Wade-Golden, 2013).

Beyond just solid practice, the board's lack of expertise in higher education (Bryant, 1964; Gale & Freeman, 1993; Schmidt, 2014), episodic meeting cadence (Trower & Eckel, 2016), and principles of shared governance (Birnbaum, 2004), necessitate establishing and maintaining relationships with other stakeholders on campus. In fact, "joint effort", "mutual understanding," and "inescapable interdependence," are highlighted in the 1967 Joint Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2001). Within the equity imperative, cultivating these resource-rich partnerships should be a continuous board priority.

Related to the need for collaboration to facilitate effectiveness of equity initiatives, as financial stewards of colleges and universities, boards have the ability to provide adequate resources to ensure that collaborations are supported with the appropriate resources that can facilitate success. Further, boards can work with other campus decision makers to make sure that equity work is not only valued, recognized, and prioritized, but also rewarded.

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Example Board Actions:

✓ Request, fundraise, and/or set fees to build financial resources that can support the sustainability of equitable practices, policies, and programming across campus.

✓ Identify and communicate rewards/incentives for those engaging in collaborative equity efforts.

Questions to Pose:

✓ What are the resource-rich relationships that you have been able to establish on campus that can help you to enact equity work?

✓ Which voices are you not hearing from? What additional connections do you need to make?

✓ How do you maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with decision makers across campus?

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Equity-Centeredness (Accountability)

Challenge:

An explicit focus on accountability is essential to advance equity on campuses (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012, p.2). Governance is meant to "provide a system of checks and balances, to ensure that decision making is transparent and to provide a process of accountability (Kennedy, 2003, p. 61). Governing boards are responsible for institutional efficiency, effectiveness, and quality control (Larsen, 2001). So on one end, boards need to make sure that other stakeholder groups are doing their part to bring about equity on campus, yet, it is not always clear how boards can be held accountable. Questions linger regarding to whom are boards accountable? Who will hold boards responsible for their duties and to the mission of the institution? Concerning board accountability, many recognize three fiduciary duties for board members—the duty of care, the duty of loyalty, and the duty of obedience (AGB, 2015). Necessarily underlying these established duties is equity as a fiduciary duty[8] (Rall et al., 2020; Commodore et al., forthcoming).

8 Krisberg, K. (June/July, 2019). Embracing Equity. Trusteeship. https://agb.org/trusteeship-article/embracing-equity/

For example, trustees must be held accountable for equity in student access and outcomes. Achieving equity for marginalized students in educational outcomes like graduation and transfer rates remains an unmet goal in U.S. higher education (Bauman et al., 2005).

Therefore, DEI planning devoid of buy-in, capacity building, accountability, and resource support (e.g., financial, technical, human, etc.) (Williams et al., 2005; Williams & Clowney, 2007), may prove unsuccessful (Williams, 2008). Equity must necessarily be woven into the board's work; it cannot be tangential to board decision-making (Commodore et al., forthcoming). Scholarship suggests long-term benefits to addressing diversity and inclusion in educational spaces (Pearson, 2021). For example, boards can influence the access and retention of people of color in higher education (Sheheen, 1988).

A persistent challenge in higher education is institutional accountability for facilitating equitable outcomes (Pena et al., 2006). For diversity efforts to take hold, governing boards need to assume a role in oversight and action (Wilson, 2016). Governance has much to do with accountability (Young, 2020). Accountability is an integral component of the role of the board. While boards do have the ultimate authority and responsibility for higher education (Martorana,1963), accountability does not only mean that board members need to hold other campus entities accountable. Trustees must also hold themselves accountable and examine the ways in which they hinder or facilitate equity opportunities. So, boards need to assess their own biases, identities, and privileges while also defining and adhering to institutional core values of equity, social justice, and democracy (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014). When applying an equity lens in decision-making, board members can guide institutional accountability for enhancing DEI for marginalized groups (Rall et al., 2020).

Opportunity:

Accountability is not just identifying the incongruity between words and action; accountability should necessarily mean that boards will commit themselves to making the necessary changes to maintain alignment with goals and practices. As put forth by Hill et al. (2001), "A governing board that is serious about its role in fostering change must live up to the values it espouses. That means being ready to change itself-its membership and the way it does business" (p. 29). Accordingly, boards need to encourage differences of opinion and question the status quo. Boards can leverage external experts if needed to host a workshop, facilitate courageous conversations, or help to evaluate board culture and internally work to change policies, practices, procedures, and behaviors that adversely impact marginalized groups. Trustees ought to think about how the board can help create a comprehensive culture of inclusivity, appreciation, belonging, value, and respect, through dialogue, outreach, education, and equitable approaches that first start internally on the board then extend to improve the recruitment, representation, retention, and support of diverse students, faculty, staff, leaders and other campus stakeholders.

Example Board Actions:

✓ Advocate for clear parameters and accountability metrics. Establish and communicate clear benchmarks to hold senior leaders accountable for supporting the equity-focused strategic plan.

Questions to Pose:

✓ What/who are the barriers to more equitable outcomes around this policy, program, practice, process, or decision? In addition to an internal board evaluation, seek out the opinions of stakeholders to determine ways in which the board might more effectively serve the institution. This means that learning and training need to be continuous. The board, for example, needs to actively work to reduce and address exclusionary practices and policies, including implicit and explicit bias. The board can also interrogate language and norms used that may further marginalize groups.

A Way Forward

"The most important work of any governing board is to create and re-create the reason for organizational existence. This is not simply the approval of a purpose statement. Nor is this a task done once, then forgotten. It is a perpetual obligation, deserving of the majority of board time and energy. It is far more important than any other board undertaking, including budgets, personnel issues, risk management, and even choice of chief executive." (Carver, 1997, p. 50)

Equity is a perpetual obligation of higher education boards and the trustees entrusted to serve in the best interest of the public. The push for equity is a long-term, day-by-day investment. Equity requires intentionality, planning, and collaboration. For boards, equity needs to be recognized as a core tenet of fiduciary work that is prioritized in all facets of board responsibilities and roles. Moreover, boards must identify equity as a guiding principle for the work of all higher education stakeholders. In holding themselves and other decision-makers accountable for quantitative and qualitative markers of equity, boards can play a crucial role moving higher education closer to a more just future. Rooted in the scholarship I provided earlier in the text, below I offer an overview of five steps boards should undertake in effort to center equity (Figure 1).

Figure 1. "ACT" Equity Cycle to Guide Board Action

Equity Audit: Take stock of where you are with your board and institution before you begin to act. Ground that audit in current and historical contexts that attend to institutional culture and climate as well. Inquire about patterns of inequity across campus (including the board). Assess any misalignment with what you say you do and how you say you act and what you say you are about versus what you actually do, how you actually act and what you actually prioritize. This is also a point where the board can leverage disaggregated data to ascertain equitable recruitment, access, inclusion, treatment, experiences, outcomes, opportunities, resources, funding, etc. Utilizing disaggregated data and leveraging the stories of campus stakeholders will give you a fuller picture of equity gaps.

Intentionally interrogate your institution's (and your board's) historical context, current climate, and future aspirations in order to better understand what caused, maintains, or even worsens inequities on campus. As you take stock of the campus, do not forget to examine the ways in which the board may perpetuate or improve current discrepancies. What are the opportunities and challenges within the board? How can the board first define (then create) a supportive and inclusive space for trustees to share their ideas, struggles, and progress related to DEI? For example, how can the board push for enhanced demographic diversity in the student, staff, or faculty populations when it is one of the least diverse constituencies affiliated with the campus? As the board improves its internal practices, it will be better able to support other stakeholders as they attempt to center DEI work. Through consistent inquiry and modeled best practices, boards can hold other campus decision-makers accountable to adopt an equity mindset that welcomes feedback and interrogation.

Commitment to Equity: Do not prematurely implement a DEI workgroup, hire a new diversity officer, put forth a diversity, etc., without the necessary resources (time, money, people, etc.) to ensure that these initiatives are supported and sustained. Remember that these committees, new staff, statements, etc., should be leveraged to engage in important DEI work—they are not the accomplishments we should celebrate devoid of supplemental action. The work continues after these foundational pieces are in place. The focus on DEI should ensure that racial equity is reflected in all facets of the institution: communications, recruitment, hiring, retention, priority-setting, governance, organizational culture, community partnerships, transparency, and accountability. Be careful that your approaches and responses to campus needs are rooted in a genuine process that centers acknowledging and identifying diverse perspectives (especially those voices that are continually marginalized), listening, reflection, transparency, and accountability.

Establish Goals: Set goals internal to the board as well as help to establish equity-centered objectives around campus. Using disaggregated information, make sure that you establish a plan with goals, timelines, groups who are in charge, etc. Once agreed on, share the plan with campus partners to maximize transparency and accountability. Even if you do not hit every mark, it is important for stakeholders to see the commitment. You may have to readjust goals but never compromise on standards. Keep in mind that this is long-term work.

Sync Goals and Action: How will we organize to do this work? Will we have a committee? Who will we partner with to make sure our work is meaningful and widespread? For those roles and responsibilities squarely under the board's purview, ensure equity is embedded in all facets. For example, when hiring a president or chancellor at the institution, center equity in all parts of the recruitment, evaluation, and selection. Make sure board agendas, onboarding, training, retreats, and committees have equity as the fulcrum.

Be sure to align your work with efforts already taking place at your institution while working in conjunction with other campus leaders. Instead of creating initiatives that may duplicate other efforts already in place, fill necessary voids in current plans or augment what is currently in place. Work to enact a plan that addresses what the institution wants/needs, not necessarily what your board thinks is the best course of action.

Invest Resources: Make sure the budget echoes the equity commitment. Without adequate resources to support the people and programs necessary to reach more equitable campuses, any equity plan will fall short. Application of resources is a compulsory step to bring goals to fruition. Though largely financial, resources in this case may also mean personnel, time, campus space, or technology. A caveat here is to be sure that the resources that are deployed are in response to the need. Be sure to identify and respond to the needs of the communities you serve.

**At each stage be sure to monitor progress, hold entities accountable and be transparent with timelines, expectations and current status. Also be aware of how context informs your work and as pressing issues arise, you may need to reconsider plans.

CONCLUSION

For the past decade, scholarship has called for equity-centered change and reform of higher education to improve access, opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students, faculty, and staff (Hurtado et al., 2012). However, many recommendations in the literature have not included consideration of the ultimate decision-makers of the institution—higher education boards of trustees (Rall et al., 2018). Just because boards have been absent from the racial equity conversation does not mean that they should be. In fact, it is governing boards that must guide and oversee change in higher education (Hill et al., 2001). Of the myriad duties the board delegates to other campus leaders, equity cannot be one of them. There are potentially far-reaching consequences should the board continue to remain on the sidelines. The influence of governing boards extends beyond campus; boards link society and higher education and thus their decisions have widespread impact (Novak & Johnston, 2005).

Though a step in the right direction, the information provided here is insufficient if it is not used to guide intentional changes to policies, practices, procedures, behaviors, and attitudes. It is not enough to discuss how boards have been separate from conversations related to racial equity; boards must be strategically woven into the conversation. Trustee boards can influence DEI practices and policies (Rall, 2021). Challenges and opportunities discussed indicate that numerical diversification of boards is a necessary but insufficient means to better incorporate a variety of perspectives. Moreover, boards have to deliberately and consistently invest the time, interest, and resources into equity-related practices in collaboration with other institutional stakeholders. Though there is minimal study or mention of the board's role related to equity in higher education, it is not a question of whether boards have a role, but whether they will assume that role. What is more, boards stand to be able to not only participate in equity-related change in higher education; they can lead and model such efforts. Bridging the knowledge obtained from both research and practice produces a recommended path for boards to follow and lays the foundation for future efforts that will advance the work at the intersection of governance and equity.

This report is unique in that it combines research and practical advice. Colleges and universities will continue to face significant challenges to incorporating diversity into their organizational structures and cultures (Adserias et al., 2017; Williams, 2013). The decision-makers of our nation's colleges and universities are positioned at the epicenter of institutional responses. So, it is essential to question the role governance actors will play in addressing such challenges (Rall, 2021). Implementing diversity agendas within higher education institutions is a pressing global challenge (Adserias et al., 2017); boards of higher education have the opportunity to directly influence and address this challenge (and more) if only they get involved.

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