

EMBRACING



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EQUITY



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Shifting demographics are changing the course of higher education yet key decision makers—namely, trustees—are largely absent from discussions and efforts designed to ensure equity among an increasingly diverse student body. A new collaborative aims to redress that dynamic.

EQUALITY

HIGHER EDUCATION IS INEXTRICABLY linked to opportunity, social mobility, higher earnings, and greater job security. It is also linked to better health and a longer life, and very often to who occupies the halls of power. Who attends and succeeds in college—and who does not—reverberates throughout nearly every aspect of our individual, family, and national life.

That makes access to such a powerful social determinant—that is, postsecondary education—fundamental in building and nurturing a truly equitable and democratic society. In 1947, President Harry Truman famously said of the landmark higher education report that he commissioned and that condemned barriers to access: “If the ladder of educational opportunity rises high at the doors of some youth and scarcely rises at the doors of others, while at the same time formal education is made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance, then education may become the means, not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them.” Just seven years earlier, in 1940, more than half of the U.S. population had no more than an eighth-grade education.

Decades later, the educational landscape had been transformed as rates of postsecondary enrollment made enormous gains across the country and across demographic groups that still faced systemic barriers to higher education and had historically been shut out altogether. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 1976 and 2015 postsecondary enrollment rates made significant gains among black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Alaska Native students. However, that enrollment among just about all demographic

groups—including white students, who still represent the great majority of college enrollees—has declined in recent years and serious and sizable disparities persist on college and university campuses.

Today, only 4 in 10 black students and about half of Hispanic students receive a degree or certificate within six years of beginning college, compared to more than two thirds of white students. The Education Trust reports such disparities nationwide, the black-white gap in degree attainment exceeding 15 percentage points in half of U.S. states. In fact, just this spring, the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education released the latest edition of its “Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States”—a series of reports specifically dedicated to studying the equity problems highlighted in Truman’s 1947 report. Sadly, the 2019 report found that inequalities in U.S. higher education opportunity are getting worse, not better. Among its many findings, the Indicators report found that the chances of completing a bachelor’s degree by age 24 was nearly five times higher for students coming from the highest-income quartile than for students from the lowest-income quartile. Overall, representation of students from low-income families at the nation’s most selective institutions has barely changed in two decades.

Such gaps not only help entrench inequalities in society at-large, they’re also an indicator that many institutions of higher education aren’t prepared to meet the country’s changing needs and demographics. In a 2015 report from the Association of American Colleges & Universities, researchers noted that by 2027, nearly half of high school seniors will be students of

color, warning that: “We are failing the very students who must become our future leaders and citizens. In fact, U.S. higher education is falling seriously behind in meeting the country’s need for citizens and workers with postsecondary learning and sought-after skills. This needed talent must come from precisely the segments of U.S. society that the American educational system has underserved—in the past and to this day.”

Fortunately, such gaps are not going unnoticed. More than 40 states, for example, have established goals to increase the number of adults with a college education, which will require efforts to better reach and serve historically underserved students. In 2009, President Barack Obama announced the American Graduation Initiative, which called for 5 million additional college graduates by 2020, aiming to recapture the country’s top global ranking for four-year degree attainment. (Progress on that national goal hasn’t been nearly quick enough to meet the 2020 target. In 2017, researchers at the nonprofit Educational Testing Service found that “given that the 2020 goal is far outside of the grasp of underserved population groups,” the objective won’t be met until 2041.) Just this year, U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz (D-Hawaii) and Rep. Donna Shalala (D-Florida) introduced the College Equity Act in their respective chambers, which would provide higher education institutions with resources to study and address inequities on their campuses.

Of course, efforts to advance equity are happening across college and university campuses as well—for example, beefing up support services that underpin a student’s opportunity to excel academically and training faculty, staff, and leadership



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on equity principles and practices. Such work is making a real difference. California State University, for example, has received national recognition for its equity efforts—among them, providing faculty with digital dashboards that display data on equity gaps—which have helped produce record graduation rates, while narrowing graduation disparities between students from historically underserved communities and their peers. In general, equity-based programs, services, and training are not uncommon in higher education, often targeting or involving campus faculty, student affairs staff, or department chairs.

But despite a growing awareness about equity, there is still a long way to go in closing higher education gaps, which is one reason a new collaborative of researchers is calling on a particularly influential group of higher education decision makers—one that’s been largely absent from equity discussions—to step up and join the conversation: college and university trustees.

A NEW PUSH TO POSITION EQUITY AS A FIDUCIARY RESPONSIBILITY

In 2016, Felecia Commodore, along with cofounders and codirectors Demetri Morgan and Raquel Rall, launched the Critical Higher Education Governance Collaborative, which aims to research, challenge, and influence higher education governance practices, with a focus on the intersections between leadership, governance, race, power, and equity. The effort is unique among postsecondary equity efforts in that it zeros in on the specific role of governing boards.

“In general, I don’t think trustees see advancing equity as their role—as part of their jobs,” says Commodore, an assistant professor in educational foundations and leadership at Old Dominion University. “But the reality is that equity touches everything.”

“Governance in higher education is really important and yet we don’t have a lot of knowledge on how leaders at those highest levels can do better when it comes to equity,” says Rall, an assistant professor

of higher education at the University of California–Riverside. “We have to start this conversation—even though it can be a scary thing to talk about—or we’re never going to get anywhere.”

The collaborative’s mission is a particularly challenging one—after all, governing boards are hardly known for their public accessibility and they’re often populated by wealthy alumni and political appointees who meet behind closed doors. And while college students, faculty, and staff are more diversified than ever, the great majority of trustees are still white, male, and older than 50, meaning board compositions typically look nothing like the student populations they serve. The truth, says Rall, is that those dynamics can make for uncomfortable conversations about equity, race, and class that many people are simply reluctant to have. Still, the collaborative is making promising inroads.

Last year, with a grant from the Spencer Foundation, the collaborative hosted its first two-day conference in Chicago on the role of the governing board in realizing higher education equity and success agency, welcoming scholars from around the country as well as representatives from AGB. And in April, at AGB’s National Conference on Trusteeship in Orlando, Commodore, Morgan, and Rall served as session leaders during two equity sessions—one on what every board member should know about educational equity and another on board-centered approaches that advance institutional inclusion.

“Partnering with AGB was a big crack in the glass,” says Morgan, an assistant professor of higher education at Loyola University Chicago. “Now, the momentum feels like it’s coming fast and furious, but the lead up to this moment was a long time coming.”

According to Rall, in the last year and a half the collaborative has led equity workshops with nearly a dozen public boards, and work is now under way to develop a

suite of tools that trustees can use to learn about and operationalize equity principles into everyday decision-making. A key component of that work is positioning equity not as a separate component, but as a lens through which trustees view their responsibilities and take action.

“We don’t want this to be a separate item on your agenda—that won’t institutionalize equity,” Commodore says. “Equity has to be centered on what (boards) do, otherwise we’ll be having these same conversations 20 years from now.”

So what exactly is equity and how does it differ from equality? According to the collaborative: “Educational equity means prioritizing decision making that demonstrates awareness of and responsiveness to the numerous ways in which sociocultural forces—related to race, gender, ability, sexuality, socioeconomic status, et cetera—impede or propel student success and institutional accountability.” An equity framework acknowledges the historical and persistent barriers that certain students face and offers them what they need to succeed and thrive. Equality, on the other hand, means treating everyone exactly the same, regardless of need.

To borrow from a popular equity-versus-equality illustration, imagine three people of very different heights trying to look over a fence. An equality approach gives all three the exact same wooden crate to stand on, resulting in the tallest person still having the best advantage. In contrast, an equity approach would tailor each wooden crate to the person’s specific needs so that all three end up with a more equal vantage point. In overly simple terms, centering equity means taking care to consider who benefits from certain decisions—and more specifically, *who doesn’t*—and whether those decisions exacerbate existing barriers and disparities in postsecondary education.

“Trustees are fiduciaries, so if anyone needs to be concerned with the moral

imperative (of equity), it needs to be them,” Morgan says. “Trustees could be game changers if they began taking these issues more seriously.”

Adds Rall: “Show me a decision or issue that *isn't* connected to equity. That’s the kind of mind-set we should have.”

The collaborative is working to make the case that equity is, in fact, a key component of a trustee’s existing fiduciary responsibilities to make careful, good-faith decisions in the best interest of the institution and its mission. Among its efforts are to start filling in the glaring dearth of research on best equity practices for higher education governing boards; raising awareness about the role trustees play in both narrowing and widening educational inequities; creating practice tools that make it easier for boards to adopt an equity lens; and collaborating with postsecondary leaders to help them prepare to serve a changing student body. All three collaborative cofounders describe the work as a steep challenge, but also note that boards that fully embrace equity could be especially powerful agents of change and opportunity.

“Honestly, it’s not surprising that the one place in higher education that’s the least vocal about and engaged in (equity) issues is the governing boardroom, and I think boards will probably continue to lag behind on this for some time,” Morgan says. “But overall, I feel optimistic. I think we’re headed in a better direction.”

As a trustee, one critical step toward that goal is making sure you have good data. More precisely, disaggregated data, Morgan says. While trustees typically receive all kinds of reports and data during their decision-making processes, Morgan and his colleagues say it’s essential to get data more granularly broken down by such characteristics as race, gender, socioeconomic status, generation of college-attending family, and geography to get a clearer and richer picture of who’s excelling, who’s not, and who’s benefiting most and least from governing decisions.

“When we disaggregate data,” Morgan says, “we can actually see what’s happening.”

Another challenge to fully institutionalizing equity among governing boards is the typical makeup and selection process of the

boards themselves, the collaborative says.

“Think about the ways that boards come to be, with members typically appointed or self-selected,” Commodore noted. “So to some extent, there is an acceptance that board composition is out of the people’s control, but I think that’s just letting boards off the hook. I think we have to have a discussion about why boards don’t look like their campuses.”

According to 2016 AGB data, racial and ethnic minorities accounted for about one quarter of all public board members and about 13.5 percent of independent board members. However, when minority-serving institutions were extracted from the total population, the percentage of minorities on public boards dropped to 17 percent and to about 11 percent among independent boards. And even though women outnumber men on college campuses, they made up only about one-third of public or independent governing board members. As part of its equity recommendations, the collaborative urges boards to place people of diverse experiences in formative roles.

“We focus a lot on programming and practices in higher education equity work because those are things that students interact with the most and we can see the most direct impact on students,” says Commodore. “But the reality is that programming and practice operate within a larger system. So if we never talk about the policies, the culture, and the priorities set through the governance structure and think through the ways decisions are made, then we’re never really going to address the totality of how we build and sustain excellent institutions.”

While the evidence base on the most effective ways to integrate and

operationalize equity within higher ed governing boards is still emerging, the collaborative says there are still a number of steps boards can take to help create and sustain equitable opportunities on their campuses. Among those steps: including equity training in a board’s new member orientation; reviewing current practices, policies, and plans for opportunities to advance equity; keeping equity in mind when developing future objectives; and engaging in and requesting equity education and training.

“We know change is slow at this level,” Commodore says. “But we believe a conversation is starting to happen that wasn’t happening before. ...At the end of the day, we want institutions that serve students well and equitably, and we think board members want that too, but many just don’t know how to do that. They need a roadmap on how to get there, and that’s what we hope to provide.”

To learn more about the Critical Higher Education Governance Collaborative and its efforts to engage trustees in closing educational equity gaps, visit www.chehc.org. ■

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