Trusteeship and Governance: The Impact on African Americans in Higher Education

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Abstract

The one aspect of education that impacts all levels and persons involved is that of governance. Governance is defined as the setting of policies. More specifically, it occurs when one is involved in the establishing or changing of operating policies, i.e., rules by which institutions make decisions. Internally, governance includes local boards of trustees or institutional governing boards as well as both academic and administrative governance structures. Externally, governance includes state boards, the legislature, and various types of state education policy boards. Stakeholders include not only faculty, staff, and students, but also the general citizenry. The thesis of this article is that the composition of governing bodies, both local and statewide boards of trustees in particular, greatly impacts policies affecting African Americans in academe.

There are more that forty-eight thousand college trustees in the United States (Houle 1989). Depending on the individual state's higher education governance structure, there may be a statewide board, particularly in the case of public colleges and universities, and/or a board of trustees at the local level which are more common for private institutions. The primary responsibility of these boards of trustees, whether at the state or local level, tends to be fiduciary in nature, with a close secondary responsibility being the appointment, monitoring, and appropriate rewarding of the chief executive officer of individual institutions.

The college or university governing board is vested with final authority over institutional policies; i.e., codified statements that define the overall policies and procedures of the institution(s) under its jurisdiction. Board members are oftentimes also responsible for interacting with government officials. And, in some instances, college and university board members have the authority to raise student tuitions.

Another major responsibility of college boards of trustee members is to develop policy for the overview and guidance of the organization of what has come to be known as strategic planning (Lennington 1996). More generally, however, the board helps relate the institution to its chief community and to accept appropriate new challenges (AAUP, ACE, and AGB 1966) found at the several levels of education. The latter is particularly important considering that over the past three decades, as a result of significant national, social, and economic evolution, both public and private institutions have undergone enormous changes in mission, quality, and costs.

Board Composition and Demographics

Ample evidence exists that African Americans are an increasingly more visible constituent group in America as students, as faculty, and as staff on the school/college campus. Contrarily, demographics of governing boards indicate that, nationally, governing board members are eighty-five percent male and ninety-three percent White. More than sixty-five percent are also fifty years or older (Kohn and Mortimer 1983).

A study of the public sector boards of higher education alone found that seventy-three percent were male, eighty-nine percent White, and sixty-six percent fifty years or older (Kirkpatrick and Petit 1984). College and university boards, in particular, are described as "monolithic" in character: White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male, well-to-do business and professional men, over fifty in age (Taylor 1987). According to the Association of Governing Boards (AGB), however, some shifts have occurred over time (Swartz and Akins 2004), albeit slight.

In terms of size, boards of public colleges and universities have an overall average of 11.1 members and a median of 9.3 members. AGB survey respondents, however, reported boards as small as five members and as large as seventy-three (Madsen 1997). According to this same survey, African American membership on boards of public colleges and universities increased from three percent between 1969 and 1977 to five percent between 1977 and 1985. However, between 1985 and 1991, this percentage increase was again only three percent. Further, between 1991 and 1997 this percentage actually decreased by 1.3 percent, indicating that these boards are becoming again more homogenous [segregated].

The picture on independent college boards looks even bleaker as no African Americans were reported on independent college and university boards in 1969. Between 1977 and 1997, the percentage of African Americans on independent college and university boards increased by only 1.5 percent.

The under-representation of African Americans, particularly on independent boards, may reflect the perception that African Americans do not control sources of power, influence, or critical support, financial or otherwise. The slightly greater presence of African Americans on public boards may reflect both public institutions' lesser reliance on private funds and a greater need for other non-financial forms of support, for example, at least the "perception" that the board is representative. The composition of boards might also be explained by the observation that nominees for board positions resemble those making the nomination; that is, that the nominees tend to be White, male, older, affluent, and business connected, might be related to the fact that people are likely to select people they know and are comfortable with - which tend to be people like themselves (Taylor 1987).

The dearth of board members who are African American is particularly a concern in the public sector. Seeking greater diversity in representation on postsecondary education governing boards needs to become a more important goal on the equity agenda for all higher education institutions in the years ahead.

Selecting Trustees

Trustees may be selected by appointment, election, or by virtue of position. Gubernatorial appointment (47.9 percent) and popular election (twenty-nine percent) are the most common forms of trustee selection in the public sector. Popular election is most common in community colleges. Legislative appointment is also a means by which a small number (two percent) of board members are selected. The most common method of selection for trustees of independent colleges and universities is to have current members select new trustees. These boards are described as "self-perpetuating," which has obvious implications with regard to both race and gender. Another 22.2 percent of boards use "other" selection methods. Alumni appear particularly motivated to serve as trustees of their institutions (Taylor 1987).

In years past, appointments of trustees in public institutions have been described as "a fight over the three P's: prestige, politics, and power," while in private colleges it has been described as "a search for people who possess the three W's: wealth, wit, and wisdom" (Kohn and Mortimer 1983, 32). Trustees for private colleges, in particular, are usually expected to be active in institutional fundraising. In public colleges, more generally, however, methods of selection "often are steeped in the political culture and tradition of a given state or local community."

Similarly, some suggest that the political access available to appointed trustees is an advantage to public institutions dependent for support on governors or legislators (Taylor 1987). Oftentimes, however, trustees' terms of office are not co-terminus with those of the appointing person or body. Rather, they may be associated with previous office holders. A by-product of this circumstance is its contribution to greater board independence than otherwise might result from a political appointment process (Taylor 1987). And, short of attempts to change the rules of appointment and tenure, the governor or legislature must wait for vacancies to occur before politically desirable appointments can be made. Most boards (public and private) have staggered terms for trustees to provide continuity and institutional memory. If the entire board turned over at the same time this would be lost, and governance, in the view of many, would be difficult.

The board chair is selected by the board itself at ninety-four percent of public colleges and universities, while the governor makes 3.1 percent of these selections. "Another person or group" selects these board chairs for 2.7 percent of public colleges and universities in the United States. Private institutions tend to select their trustees often using alumni balloting (Hines 1988, 384).

Reframing Governance and Its Impact on African Americans

The decade leading up to the twenty-first century of the 1990s will be remembered as the era of educational restructuring in the states of California, Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky, among others. In California, fifty-four percent of those voting during the November 1996 general election supported Proposition 209 which effectively ended the practice of using affirmative action as one of the criteria in college admissions. While initially refusing to admit all students who score below a certain class rank, the University of California's Board of Regents approved, in March 1999, a plan for admitting only the top four percent of such students (Education Week, March 31, 1999).

The State of Florida's Governor Jeb Bush made as one of his top priorities "The One Florida Initiative." This "new" diversity initiative, according to its crafters, is "not tied to quotas or preferences." The One Florida Initiative guarantees college admission to the top twenty percent of students of each high school (Powers 2001).

According to some, however, this plan was adopted without adequately analyzing its overall impact. For example, to what extent does this initiative take into consideration that many of the brightest African American high school students attend more academically rigorous K-12 schools? These African American students may not graduate in the top twenty percent of their class, but may have experienced a more challenging academic environment than their counterparts from less challenging schools, and thus have developed higher order requisite skills needed to succeed in more academically rigorous postsecondary environments. Under the One Florida Initiative, will such students be punished for toughing it out in more challenging academic environments? The impact such new criteria are having must be scrutinized and no one set of criteria should be settled on without a long and fruitful debate at all levels of governance about its effectiveness and fairness in allocating scarce places in the education system.

In 2001, the Florida Education Governance Reorganization Implementation Act was passed by the Florida legislature and subsequently signed into law by the governor. Among its most significant provisions was the establishment of the Florida legislature as the education policy-making body of the state and the creation of the Florida Board of Education to oversee kindergarten through graduate school education. Governor Bush made this governance overhaul one of his highest priorities during the 2001 legislative session. He argued that Florida must develop a seamless "K-20" public education system that comprehensively addresses the state's rapidly expanding education needs. He also believes that the new governance system will ensure increased accountability to taxpayers (Herbert 2001) as well as increased equity in education.

Similar to the two aforementioned states, the state of Georgia's reform effort involves, affects, and spans the entire education system - from preschool through college. Known as the P-16 initiative, the effort is designed to raise student aspirations for completing high school and going on to postsecondary education, to ensure students are prepared to succeed at all levels, and to ensure teachers are prepared to help students achieve. Supporters include the governor and representatives of the legislature, public schools, technical institutes, colleges and universities, health and human services, the private sector, the larger community, and students. Accomplishments include the renowned Hope Scholarship program, as well as the adoption by the Board of Regents of a pre-school to postsecondary education policy direction that brings higher education into full partnership with school districts, technical institutes, and community groups.

Kentucky began as early as 1995 to articulate the absolute need for a quality education system and conducted a comprehensive review of pre-K, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education to help achieve this goal. Kentucky's pre-reform system, particularly postsecondary education, was highly decentralized and lacking in common purpose. It was basically a system of autonomous institutions loosely coordinated by a statewide board. Political success was measured by the promotion of campus objectives at the expense of statewide needs (Cox 1999). Early reforms of the 1990s in elementary and secondary education were soon matched by comprehensive postsecondary education reform. Further, the Kentucky legislature enacted legislation that produced profound results by tying success of minority representation to funding for the state-assisted institutions. In this regard, the Commonwealth of Kentucky has made a fundamental commitment to access and quality education opportunities at all levels and for all students. More recently, Kentucky has created the Regional Stewardship Trust Fund which provides financial incentives to postsecondary institutions to support a focus on creating educational preparedness, access, and success.

Competencies

Board competencies are described by Chait, Holland, and Taylor (1993) within the context of six dimensions: (1) contextual, i.e., the board member understands and takes into account the culture and norms of the organization it governs/serves; (2) educational, i.e., where the board member takes the necessary steps and is well-informed about the institution, the profession, and the board's role, responsibilities, and performance; (3) interpersonal, where the board's collective welfare is attended to and a sense of cohesiveness is fostered; (4) analytical, where the board member recognizes complexities and subtleties in the issues faced and draws upon multiple perspectives to dissect complex problems and to synthesize appropriate responses; (5) political, where the board member accepts as a primary responsibility, the need to develop and maintain healthy relationships among key constituencies; and (6) strategic, where the board member helps envision and shape organizational direction and helps ensure a strategic approach to the organization's future.

The under-representation of African Americans, particularly on independent boards, however, does not appear to be tied to the above set of competencies to any large measure. Rather, such under-representation may reflect the perception that African Americans do not control sources of power or critical support. The first, third, and fifth competences, i.e., (1) that the board member understands and takes into account the culture, and norms of the organization it governs/serves, (3) that the board's collective welfare is attended to and a sense of cohesiveness is fostered, and (5) that the board member accepts as a primary responsibility the need to develop and maintain healthy relationships among key constituencies, can prove problematic when the culture and norms of the organization, in this case the college or university, are antithetical to the goals of racial equity and social justice. The second, fourth, and, depending on its direction, sixth named board competencies appear as less troublesome baseline competency requirements for all board members in light of the continued struggle of African Americans in academe.

Policy Implications

Ample literature calls attention to the issue of under-representation of African Americans at all levels of education. Numerous strategies have been put forth to address this under-representation. Visibly missing from these analyses and strategic plans, however, is the historically low or token presence, if not absence, of African Americans on higher education internal and external governing boards, related policy boards, and on relevant state legislative committees. When such analyses have been conducted, Boards of Trustees have been found to be older, wealthy members of the majority, and male. As such, the legitimacy of trustees has been challenged on the grounds that they are too homogenous to govern today's more diverse (particularly public) institutions (Taylor 1987). In other words, while the student body has changed, most boards do not reflect that greater diversity. These student bodies are sure to be more diverse in the future. Further, one of the most important board responsibilities is appointing the president, and the composition of the board may determine with whom the board feels comfortable working. More diverse boards may select more African Americans as presidents.

Tierney (2002) goes a step further and discusses in his article "Governing Urban and Metropolitan Institutions in a Time of Change" that "who participates in governance may need to be rethought to such an extent that new structures are created and others are eliminated." Board composition as well as the composition of state legislatures and committees affect, in a variety of ways, the internal functioning of education at all levels. More sophistication as well as diverse leadership is needed among those involved in all aspects of education governance. Specifically, we need more African Americans (1) appointed or elected to governing boards, (2) joining the ranks and reexamining our existing framework of education policies, (3) helping to tear down artificial barriers, and (4) providing direction that allows all individuals within the education enterprise and society at large to reach their full potential.

Bringing about fundamental, lasting change and improvement within the nation's K-12 and postsecondary education systems will also depend, in large part, on establishing significantly stronger connections between K-12 and higher education. Unquestionably, state leaders as well as governance officials have the leverage to bring about change and improvement within the nation's K-12 and postsecondary education systems (Levine 2001). They can also encourage the partnerships needed to deal with these issues effectively (Yavorsky 1988) as well as the troubling gaps that have ensued. Along these lines, diverse governance officials, including college and university trustees, must come together and devote greater attention to a number of troubling gaps between the two systems. For example, governance structures must address the uneven quality and performance of the K-12 teaching force; increasing high school dropout rates, poor college retention rates; high remediation rates among college undergraduates; and the downward trend in postsecondary access and retention among African Americans and other minorities, if we are to build a stronger America.

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