Bounded Boards: a Commentary on the Limitations of Knowledge and Scope of Research on Boards of Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite the emergence of new scholarship, public higher education boards in the United States remain relatively under-investigated. While the literature on higher education governance and boards, in particular, tends to profess these knowledge gaps repeatedly, few works have scratched the surface as to why our understanding of boards is so limited. In this paper, the authors move past the acknowledgment that boards are vastly understudied to reflect on why that is the case. Using a case study centered on interviews with governance scholars, the authors highlight findings of logistical, theoretical, methodological, and epistemological rationale that have prevented governing boards from being studied in a manner, depth, and scope on par with their import in higher education. The authors present the case that researchers must first recognize and then identify ways to address and overcome these challenges to innovate research in the field of governance, particularly in a higher education environment in which boards are more visible. Implications for future research are provided.

Keywords Governance · Trusteeship · Organization · Administration · Research limitations

> "*Why is this subject so difficult? Considering how much time is given to talking about trustees it is remarkable that people should be so muddled about*

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*them. They are regarded with esteem, envy and suspicion; they are honored and caricatured. Why is there this confusion?" –(*Lewis, 1952*)*

The nationally recognized curator of the 1619 project, Nikole Hannah Jones, was denied tenure by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Board of Trustees (Stripling & Thomason, 2021). The reaction to this decision brought into focus how consequential governing boards can be when they decide to leverage their power. In short, this board decision revealed some fundamental realities that animate the central topic of this piece—a great deal of confusion and uncertainty characterize the role of boards of higher education.

Boards are responsible for the entire university (Dominguez, 1971). Trustees are engaged in trust relationships to "…manage the institution in the public interest, to account to official bodies and to the public for actions taken and funds used, to carry out the ethical responsibilities involved in the education of youth, to hold title to and to administer endowment funds, and to execute other specific trusts" (Henderson, 1967, p. 10). While "on paper" board relationships and responsibilities carry great decision-making power (Warren, 1914), there lacks a thorough understanding of the trusteeship in practice. As the Hannah Jones case illuminates, even when a spotlight is placed on governing boards, lack of understanding exacerbates efforts to engage boards as an entity or hold them accountable for justly carrying out their responsibilities.

Though bylaws and other institutional documents articulate the role of boards in postsecondary education (Henderson, 1967), how boards wield this power of influence is presently of great concern as the politicization of higher education increases (Taylor et al., 2020). Further, while consensus exists regarding the varying degrees of legally supported authority that boards yield over postsecondary institutions, the same agreement does not define the empirically or theoretically documented understanding of the processes and practices that constitute the work of boards. Therefore, we call for a renewed focus on positioning boards in higher education scholarship, with an explicit eye towards innovating how boards are researched and conceptualized to meet the evolving needs of institutions, the sector, and the public good.

The Current Reality

Previous literature has offered insight into board structure, history, and composition (Beck, 1947; Mortimer, 1971; Minor, 2006). But a focus on structure alone falls short of understanding how board members effectively operate as a board (Beck, 2014). For instance, board effectiveness (Holland et al., 1989), satisfaction (Michael et al., 1999), and influence are only beginning to be uncovered (Barringer & Riffe, 2018). All too often, scholarship highlights inadequate knowledge of the trusteeship (Bensimon, 1984); scholars profess that knowledge is "limited" (Kezar, 2006, p. 970), not extensive (Barringer & Slaughter, 2016), and that "no one knows enough to talk about it" (Lewis, 1952, p. 17). Because there is "very little research" (Lozano, 2020, p. 1878), "the existing literature is weak" (Kezar, 2006, p. 970).

Researchers express additional concern regarding the fragmentation of the already circumscribed governance research (Peterson, 1985). Some stop there, highlighting insufficient data on this under-investigated topic without considering why or how such limitations came to be. Considering its principal role and distinctive authority in higher education, it is concerning that despite some expansion (e.g., Barringer et al., 2019; Chun, 2017; Lozano, 2020), empirical research still falls short (Birnbaum, 1988; Hearn & McLendon, 2012; Kerr & Gade, 1989; Kohn & Mortimer, 1983; Michael & Schwartz, 1999; Taylor & Machado, 2008).

It is also essential to elucidate the distinction between empirical work on trustees and publications supported by organizations like the Association of Governing Boards of Colleges and Universities (AGB) or the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA). AGB and ACTA exist in the service of boards. While central insights emanate from these entities (e.g., AGB's annual composition survey), these are not adequate stand-ins for scholarship conducted by researchers and practitioners interested in improving overall postsecondary outcomes. The issue we take, however, is two-fold. First, the work of these entities is often presented without the necessary and constructive critique that peer-reviewed research provides. Only selected consultants that align with the mission of these groups are given outlets to share governance-related materials. Second, access to the information can be difficult to obtain if protected by membership fees. To be clear, the access these organizations possess, AGB in particular, to trustees across the U.S. has allowed them to explore trusteeship on an unparalleled scale, and so their publications are relevant (if not predominant) and useful. However, the nature of the academy demands more breadth, rigor, theoretical and methodological approaches, and other nuance that may be unattainable within the confines of these organizations.

A Crucible Moment for Governance

In our examination of the board literature, two notions are evident. First, boards are consequential in helping higher education institutions realize their espoused goals (AGB, 2014). For instance, raising money (Essex & Ansbach, 1993), regulating tuition and financial expenditures (Ness et al., 2015), responding to controversy (Tierney & Rall, 2018) and crisis (Rall, 2021), and presidential selection (Commodore, 2018). Second, researchers, and those who work with or serve on boards, do not know enough about how individual trustees or boards as a whole navigate processes or actualize outcomes related to their roles (Nason, 1982). The premise of this paper is simple, how do we reconcile these two points? We question, "…why knowledge is more limited than opinion in this area" (Holland et al., 1989, p. 436).

Over the years, "scholars have aimed to grasp the phenomenon of higher education governance…" (Dobbins et al., 2011, p. 666). Whereas some scholars have synthesized the governance and board literature, bemoaned the lack of scholarship in the area, and even offered directions for future scholarship in the field (e.g., Kezar & Eckel, 2004), none within the field of higher education studies (Renn, 2020) have attempted to interrogate *why* knowledge of boards is so limited. Despite decades of work, research has yet to illuminate the reasons behind such restrictions.

The historical legacy of so few scholars engaged in a scholarly area of such importance has impacted the volume, quality, and variety of board research. The long-standing gap influences the policies, practices, and expectations that make their way into people's lives within and outside higher education. To more intentionally frame the rationale for why so little is known about boards, we first discuss the limits in the breadth and quantity of research and approaches. We then transition to the challenges of studying boards by outlining logistical, theoretical, methodological, and epistemological complications of exploring this unique decision-making group. We present implications for future directions of board research.

The Limitations and Opportunities of Board Research

Topical Gaps

Exposing barriers to trusteeship research requires an overview of preexisting limitations and opportunities. Despite the recent resurgence of board research, many studies on trusteeship are antiquated (Michael et al., 1997), having seen a genesis in the early 1960s (Sacristán, 2014). Board literature is primarily descriptive rather than evaluative (Holland et al., 1989)—prescriptive rather than empirical (Michael et al., 1997) and often applies a functionalist perspective emphasizing structures (Vidovich & Currie, 2011). Board research has in large part neglected consideration of topics like culture (Baird, 2007), gender (Rall & Orué, 2020); Hardy-Fanta & Stewartson, 2007; Scott, 2018), race (Sav, 1986), and equity (Author, forthcoming; Rall et al., 2019, Morgan, LePeau, & Commodore, 2021; Morgan, Rall, & Commodore, 2021) and focuses primarily on private institutions instead of public institutions (Glenny & Schmidtlein 1983) or minority-serving institutions (Commodore, 2018). In neglecting such critical areas, this literature engages in understanding board practices, governance structures, and organizational behavior and culture in ways that ignore how race, class, gender, and implicit bias intersect with power to influence institutional decision-making and culture.

Further, the scholarship that does center public institutions overwhelmingly concentrates on single institutions, limiting knowledge of boards that govern multicampus systems (Morgan, LePeau, & Commodore, 2021; Morgan, Rall, & Commodore, 2021; Paltridge et al., 1973). Or, research focuses on external connections (e.g., trustee interlocks) that individual trustees have with corporations (Mathies & Slaughter, 2013) so that nuanced understanding of the internal board dynamics is not a primary emphasis. Though understanding networks and interlocks prove essential in beginning the discussion of the role of board composition on decision-making processes, it leaves off the table the understanding of how these interlocks and networks directly impact board dynamics, are strategically used to provide or deny access to decision-making, and agenda-setting power, and do or do not perpetuate inequity. Important quantitative work has spanned the topics of institutional conflict of interest (Slaughter et al., 2014), connectivity across elite universities (Barringer et al., 2019), and the evolving role of trusteeship (Barringer et al., 2020). However, this quantitative understanding does not provide the nuanced understanding of board dynamics needed to holistically assess board practices and their impact on institutional planning and

policy setting. Boards were understudied for a long time, and recent scholarship promises that more researchers are engaged in studying boards. Present national contexts, however, suggest that more scholarship is needed.

Theoretical and Methodological Gaps

Scholars also highlight theoretical and methodological shortcomings of board research. Some put forth that "the field of higher education remains notably penurious with regard to any comprehensive theory of governance, much less one that has been systematically tested through research (Holland et al., 1989 p. 436). So, there is a lack of theoretical conceptualizations of governance (Richardson Jr, 1974) at large and boards of trustees in particular (Pusser et al., 2006). For example, theoretical frameworks of "human relations, cultural, and social cognition theories remain underutilized" (Kezar & Eckel, 2004, p. 373). Due to limited work linked directly to the distinctive nature of the higher education sector, frameworks have largely borrowed from business and for-profit literature (Hermalin, 2004). Examples of the application of external models used to understand board activities include resource dependency theory (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), the open system model (Katz & Kahn, 1978), the political model (Baldridge, 1971), agency theory (Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015), principal-agent theory (Lane & Kivistö, 2008), stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), organized anarchy (Cohen & March, 1974), organizational theory (Bastedo, 2007), the bureaucratic model (Corson, 1960), the collegial model (Millett, 1962), and institutional theory (Gupta et al., 1994).

Methodologically, qualitative approaches such as case studies have been underutilized (Tierney, 2008), though Bastedo (2005, 2009a, 2009b) has increased the use of case studies. Document analysis and quantitative approaches such as surveys have predominated (Hartnett, 1969, 1970;). Content analysis (Morgan, LePeau, & Commodore, 2021) and grounded theory have also been used (Kezar, 2005). However, studies have been historically small (Kezar, 2004), and approaches have been more similar than disparate. We also note the plethora of studies where boards are identified among a constellation of other stakeholders (e.g., presidents and legislators), but are not the sole focus of inquiry (e.g., Gándara, 2020; McLendon, 2003; Ness et al., 2015; Rutherford & Lozano, 2018; Tandberg, 2010, 2013). Quantitative approaches to this work have included descriptive statistics (Barringer et al., 2019), social network analysis (Barringer et al., 2019), and survey research methodology (Michael et al., 1999).

Gaps Caused by Inconsistent Access to Boards

Exacerbating the current state of board scholarship is an ominous shroud of mystery that covers the trusteeship. In the corporate space, scholars have dubbed this dynamic "cosmetic independence" (Sharpe, 2010). As a result, we know little about who board members are or what they do; research has also shown that trustees are often uncertain of and unprepared for their roles (Davis, 1997; Freedman, 2005). Kezar (2006) notes that understanding board roles is problematic. Other scholars echo the ambiguity and confusion of board roles by researchers and trustees alike

(Hendrickson et al., 2013). Though bylaws delineate certain powers and responsibilities vested in the board, how these roles manifest in the governance of higher education is less clear.

Braiding the Gaps Together

We first reiterate that more robust research regarding higher education boards is needed, and present approaches fall short of expanding what is known about boards. Second, it is no longer enough to assert the need for more research at the close of manuscripts. Scholars have a responsibility to illuminate tensions and more deeply interrogate the underlying commonalities that continue to limit the full potential of board research. To gain perspective regarding the challenges to conducting board research, the central research question is: *What are the existing barriers to researching higher education boards?*

Methodology

Unlike other scholarship that is only descriptive or pulls directly from trustees, this study was one where we, as academic researchers, studied our peers (Wiles et al., 2006). Fifteen governance scholars were the participants. Participants' careers related to governance ranged from four years to over forty years in which these individuals published dissertations, research articles, books, opinion editorials, and courses centered on the topic of governance as well as served as faculty, board members, and administrators. Though all participants were researchers, some were faculty associated with institutions while others were associated with private organizations. Three of the participants had served on at least one higher education governing board. The various backgrounds informed their interpretation of what research concentrations and research approaches would be needed to assist boards and institutional leaders in moving into the next era of higher education. There were four women and eleven men in the sample; two were people of color. Demographically, our sample was disproportionally male and disproportionally white—characteristics that ironically also describe the majority of boards in the U.S. (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018). Participant diversity afforded nuanced perspectives on governance research.

While many qualitative researchers often have to decide between data collection via focus groups or individual interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we did both. Using interviews or focus groups alone would not have produced the same level of depth for our dataset. The sample was selected based on a multistep process. Initially, we completed a google scholar search of "boards of higher education", "higher education boards", "trustees of higher education" and similar phrases. We assessed the list of scholars with citations in peer-reviewed academic journals that publish research on

governance actors[1] or books on trustees or governance. We then proceeded to invite these scholars to a two-day convening. The expertise of these scholars is demonstrated by some combination of the following: Top 40 ranking on Rick Hess' Edu-Scholar Public Influence Rankings, a dissertation centered on governing boards, the number of trustee-focused citations per google scholar, authorship of governance books, and work with governance entities such as ACE, ACTA or AGB.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are qualitative approaches to explore perceptions, attitudes, and ideas centered on specific issues or experiences (Kevern & Webb, 2001). We engaged in deep, large group, and small group conversations centered on the limitations and possibilities of future board research. Our focus group was activity-oriented (Colucci, 2007) within the context of the conference and included exercises like polling and writing prompts. Focus groups such as the one we convened are regularly used in higher education research (Kevern & Webb, 2001). They are part of a qualitative research technique used to obtain data about the opinions of small clusters of participants about a given phenomenon (Kevern & Webb, 2001). This interactive format allowed us to utilize group dynamics to stimulate discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015), and individuals were able to build on the responses of others.

Interviews

One shortfall of focus groups is the tendency for certain participants to dominate the research process (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Often socially acceptable perspectives predominate (Patton, 2016) and it is often difficult to separate this dominant narrative from individual vantage points. Therefore, in addition to the in-person focus group, we did follow-up telephone interviews with ten of the focus group participants. The ordering of our research was deliberate; focus groups preceding the interviews allowed us to build the rapport crucial for candor and depth (McGrath et al., 2019). The one-on-one conversations allowed us to hear the individual voices from participants.

An intermediary step between the in-person gathering and the phone interviews was email engagement. Taking advantage of email as a contemporary and popular form of communication that facilitates valuable research opportunities both online and offline (Burns, 2010), we initiated follow-up with all conference participants via email. Ten of the participants opted for real-time follow-up in addition to offering comments in writing. By opting to interview governance scholars and researchers instead of resigning ourselves to a literature review or document analysis, we modeled prior insightful work in higher education. Such an approach was used by Holland et al. (1989) in their work directly with board members to elucidate the mainstays of effective governance. Tierney and Bensimon (1996) sought to better understand the tenure and promotion process by interviewing those directly involved

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[1] Like the Journal of Educational Administration, the Journal of Higher Education, Research in Higher Education

in the process—assistant professors, department chairs, deans, and provosts. Here, we sought to reveal research limitations via semi-structured interviews with knowledgeable individuals (Yin 1984) in the sector of governance. An integral research tool, our interviews helped us obtain information that cannot be procured using other methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and uncover heightened "…depth, detail, vividness, richness, and nuance" (Owen, 2014 p. 9).

Interviews were done via phone to facilitate access to participants in spite of the geographic distance between the interviewers and participants (Sweet, 2002). The semi-structured interviews lasted until there was saturation of collected data. While there was no rigid time constraint, the interviews typically lasted between 60 and 90 min, in accordance with Mason (2002). Because one limitation of interviews is that interviewers cannot separate their ways of knowing from the questions they pose (Dilley, 2004); we varied the interviewer, jointly created the interview protocol, and transcribed the interviews verbatim. Our status as qualitative researchers knowingly and unknowingly influenced data collection because we are part of the research instrument. Our position as governance scholars particularly permeated our work. Participants often inquired about our experiences with and opinions on the topic of governance research. This study reflects our prior work, training within our discipline and profession, advice of our mentors and colleagues, and the scholarship we have read.

Analysis

Data analysis is an essential part of qualitative research used to organize and make sense of textual data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data analysis was iterative, inductive, and constantly compared between different data sources and phases of analysis while still being systematic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, we engaged in three stages of analysis that entailed coding focus group transcripts (phase one), coding interview transcripts (phase two), and synthesizing the resulting codes from the previous phases to develop themes that best respond to the research question (phase three). We divided transcripts among the research team and met periodically to synthesize insights and recalibrate analysis steps.

In phase one of analysis, we read focus group transcripts to refamiliarize ourselves with the main topics covered. Second, we captured key points in the participant responses and tagged them with summary codes (Saldaña, 2016). The identified codes came from a combination of the pool of concepts we had from our disciplinary and professional reading and words and phrases used by participants (Saldaña, 2016). The third step included compiling the codes from step two and, working independently still, identifying recurring patterns within those codes that had resonance with our research question. After this step, we met to debrief the independent coding exercises and select codes, based on group consensus, that were most relevant to our inquiry.

In congruence with the constant comparison approach to qualitative research, to initiate phase two of our analysis approach, we utilized the codes from phase one to examine the similarities and differences between the interview and focus group data. There were no noticeable distinctions between the data obtained from the focus groups and

the data obtained from the interviews. The parity is likely because we used our informal notes from the focus groups to design the interview protocol to push our discussions in more pointed and expansive directions. Nonetheless, interview analysis was completed leveraging the tentative themes from phase one. The first step, the independent reading of transcripts, facilitated an understanding of nuances within the themes that aided our ability to address thick description of the emerging themes (Geertz, 1973).

The second step in this interview transcript phase involved identifying strong quotes or ideas presented by participants illustrative of the emerging themes and tagging them accordingly (Saldaña, 2016). We followed this thematic analysis of the transcripts to keep the stories conveyed by participants intact. Example codes from this phase of analysis include: "research challenges", "research support", "research experience", and "strategies for success."

We met again in the third and final analysis phase to distill the resulting codes and build consensus around grouping codes with shared insight (i.e. themes) (Saldaña, 2016). These themes had multiple examples from the interviews or focus groups that conveyed a spirit of richness in articulating the main storyline that describes the theme and a sense of nuance that helps render the themes as comprehensively as possible.

Trustworthiness

We utilized an array of strategies to enhance the rigor and quality of our qualitative inquiry (Tracy, 2010). Peer review was used to audit our emergent insights. This approach included debriefing our interpretations with an individual outside the research team who probed for points of conflict, clarification, and significance. Feedback from these check-ins informed our approach to consensus building at the close of each phase. Member checking to avoid misinterpretation was employed to ensure the credibility of the data. Transcripts were sent to each interviewee with instructions to add or edit transcripts to align with what they hoped to convey. Edited transcripts were included in analysis, although most participants chose to leave their transcripts as provided.

Additionally, between the authors, we leveraged nearly thirty years of research and governance experience. We used that knowledge to our advantage when discussing topics germane to governance with the participants, a form of sincerity (Tracy, 2010). The data presented below are organized to better understand why there are gaps in knowledge about higher education boards. Secondarily, the participants unearthed some additional shortfalls in the governance research. Though our focus was the reasoning behind minimal governance scholarship, participants also exposed some areas needing further study. While the other gaps were not the primary focus of this paper, the additional information is related to and makes appropriate extrapolation to this study.

Findings

Before more clearly delineating the issues, we want to state clearly that regardless of institutional type, the need to identify and address these governance challenges is of great importance. Our participants were persistent on this point during the focus

groups and interviews. Participants shared their experiences studying boards and those facets that hindered a deeper understanding of boards and board dynamics. Our analysis coalesced into two overarching themes regarding the barriers to engaging in higher education governance research: logistical challenges and theoretical, methodological and research challenges. Regarding the theme of logistical challenges discussions arose in the areas of diversity of board structure, lack of interest and support, access, and climate limitations.

Logistical Challenges

No One Thing

Studying boards is complicated because of the bevy of distinctions; each institution is different, systems are different, board structures are different, and more. The range of board characteristics, contexts, and challenges was not lost on our participants. Dr. Woods explicated this diversity:

> With a country with 50 different states and some territories, there isn't any easy way to compare how higher education is organized and governed. It's apples and oranges everywhere. It's so difficult...Whether you're looking at the independent colleges or universities, or the public colleges or universities, it's very hard to point to a model of what is best…

Participants expressed difficulty studying boards because of their multifaceted nature. While scholars suggest that the uniqueness of the board is necessary to attend to specific institutional needs or goals, the multiplicity makes it difficult to understand boards in the larger scope. Dr. Banks, an academic for over forty years, also highlighted the disparity in governance types:

> … even among privates, like the board of Harvard is going to be very different from the board of a liberal arts institution that is struggling to get 500 students to enroll. And… aside from the very basic, like the public versus the private…how we can classify institutions…in a way that is meaningful…you know, a faith-based institution versus HBCU…[T]here are a lot of different breakpoints, and I think if we can see…what the differences and maybe trends are within those…I think that is kind of the first stepping stone… Like the problem I think we run into all the time is what's best practice?...It kind of depends.

He acknowledges that while comparison is necessary, the breadth of institutional context complicates analysis. In various ways, participants reiterated the difficulty of studying boards because there is no archetype. The idea that there is no "one way" or "best way" to organize or make decisions on behalf of our nation's postsecondary institutions complicates the study of boards.

At the basic level, choosing samples carefully to compare institutions and boards at general and specific levels, including Carnegie classification or indicators for board characteristics, may contribute to scholarship. However, we take the time to

highlight this limitation of "no one thing" for two reasons. First, the vast array of boards underscores that though board research is increasing, we are far from saturation. The various advances need to be applied across the myriad contexts, with additional theoretical and methodological approaches. Second, because we have seen the recent push to translate research into "best practices" in higher education. The "no one thing" limitation serves to intentionally question whether this model can (or should) carry the same weight in an arena such as boards of higher education. To truly improve decision-making, boards will need to recognize their nuanced reality and "…transition from the current stressed practices to 'What Comes Next?' decision-making (DeSantis & Dammann, 2020, p.7).

No Interest or Support

Even when researchers can penetrate the logistical hurdles of studying boards, an additional challenge is the lack of awareness of, interest in, and support of board research. Many do not understand the integral nature of boards to higher education. Dr. Luther contemplated the disconnect with board research: "I think more folks have to understand really, what's the role of the board?...[T]he boards are here; they have a really powerful role. So, there's got to be a certain level of education that has to happen with funders." Dr. Luther suggests that monies should be available for researchers to pursue questions related to the trusteeship. Incentivizing data collection and study participation could be an avenue that is mutually beneficial for the researcher and the board.

Dr. Beau also clearly highlights the lack of support for board research. He voiced:

It's very interesting to me…there still doesn't seem to be this understanding that… [governance] is something we should put some financial backing on and get high understanding of if we're interested in better institutions... It's like we're…trying to find all these interventions, but not thinking about trying to understand how to actually run the institution better…[T]he biggest challenge is that there just aren't enough venues willing to sort of support bedrock research on things like governance in higher education…There's just not a lot of great places that are…dying to support work on boards in the same way that 'were all doing research on student success…There are just not places that are funding it. It's really, really hard to get anyone to pay attention to this…work, even though…it's really important work to be doing, but it's just not a priority…

The challenge here is that governing boards are nebulous in higher education. We find ourselves in a sort of "chicken versus egg problem." Without more solidified knowledge, it may prove difficult for some funders to know how they might support this work. On the other side, without more funding to expand and incentivize governance scholarship, understanding in this area may remain limited in significant ways. Some of the participants in our sample have been doing governance work for over forty years, and they still are amazed by the lack of financial support for and interest in this fundamental area.

To be clear, there is valuable and necessary work that can be done in this area without funding, however, financial support, especially at a large scale, would help to expedite and expand board knowledge and impact. Funding also enhances visibility of the topic, which may ultimately increase interest and attention.

Access

Access presents yet another obstacle to governance research. Though data access is an issue pertinent to all research, we want to note the unique hurdles of board research. The notable titles and status of the board members in their everyday lives, coupled with the delicate nature of some of the decisions made on behalf of the institution, complicate the access to study of boards. Dr. Lines reiterated the fact that board members are "…incredibly busy. Like what are the chances we can even get access?" In addition to their full schedules, boards only meet a few times a year. As put forth by Dr. Carter, "I mean, a lot of these boards…they're only meeting maybe three, four times a year." So, it becomes logistically hard to observe and study boards. Suppose researchers are not privy to key pieces of knowledge due to the sensitivity or legality of the matter or cannot access certain board members due to their professional designations or the never-ending domino cascade of assistants and overfull schedules. In that case, advancement will not be made in this crucial area.

Unlike corporate governance structures that must be responsive to federal securities laws requiring and monitoring disclosure of information to the public (Johnson, 2012), higher education boards face little regulation beyond the threat of public records requests (McLendon & Hearn, 2006). Additionally, unlike research on presidents (Beardsley 2017; Neumann & Bensimon, 1990) or even admissions committees (Posselt, 2016), researching public boards is inimitable in numerous ways including, but not limited to, the fact that they are not employees of the institution, they are not compensated, they have little expertise in higher education (Gerber, 1997), and only meet episodically (Forbes & Milliken, 1999). The distinctions of boards complicate trustee research in ways the study of other elite stakeholders is not.

Climate

The precarious nature of the academy has not helped in this regard. Boards have faced a myriad of crises and controversies in recent history. Participants alluded to the negativity from this focus may discourage boards from opening themselves to scrutiny, no matter the educational intent. Most boards are not opening their doors to evaluation (at least not willingly and not imposed by accreditation agencies), and new insights are impossible without access. Dr. Banks pushed our interrogation around the impenetrable nature of board research further by acknowledging that board members are part of the challenge as well. He shared, "...the issue is… higher education research on boards…it's very thin and that's because [boards] don't want to be studied… they don't necessarily want to be studied and so they say no…".

Dr. Downs goes further to say that not only are they not interested in being studied, but they are also disinterested in and have a hard time internalizing the

findings of research related to the trusteeship, "They get information. The problem is that there's so much information. I don't know that they always actually read it. I don't know that they are all interested. I don't know that they all understand it." The access to participants and the accessibility of the data must be overcome to offer more insight on boards. Enhanced research approaches may effectively speak to this first type of accessibility, but the latter may be more important and more complicated to address as it relates to improving board practice.

Theoretical, Methodological, and Researcher Limitations

Participants also highlighted how higher education governance has been under-theorized and has not considered frameworks outside those traditionally leveraged (e.g., principal-agent theory). Scholars enounce "…that the field of higher education remains notably impoverished with regard to any comprehensive theory of governance, much less one that has been systematically tested through research (Holland et al., 1989 p. 435). Floyd (1995) sustains this sentiment positing that literature on boards can be further advanced by conceptual and methodological examination in vital areas. For example, Dr. Robins noted that "There haven't been too many critical looks at board diversity in terms of the research…" This theoretical variety is needed to investigate board diversity and implicit structures, policies, and procedures that may be embedded into the trusteeship. In a time when critical theory and its outgrowths critical race theory, BlackCrit, LatCrit, and others have become increasingly prominent and accepted lenses through which to examine higher education research (Patton, 2016), research exploring higher education boards and governance has not majorly adopted such frameworks.

In line with a need for increased diversity in theoretical approaches to board research, participants espoused that more methodological and empirical approaches to the study of boards are also needed. Acknowledging the methodological restrictions, Dr. Luther noted, "It's been hard to figure out what's the appropriate methodology." Dr. Banks supported the idea that methodological approaches have been insufficient:

> Boards are very tough. They often will not answer surveys and I have never seen a study where someone hangs out and does an ethnography of board meetings…What we have done are largely interviews and that's kind of the way it goes… You can get a particular slice of life through interviews…but you're also not getting other things.

Uncertainties and unanswered questions are the only commonality across board research. These constraints in method may also be tied to limitations of access. Regardless, other approaches are necessary. Dr. Bars focuses on measurement and shares:

> The great challenges are challenges of measurement…and causality…I think it's probably ultimately elusive, but to the extent that we could develop some

metric that tracks a board…not just a board's policies and procedures, but the long-term effects of the board's actions and decisions…

He pushes us to think too about the need for longitudinal data to investigate the impact of board actions over time. Dr. Bars also highlighted the extent to which higher education board research has relied on the foundations of other disciplines. He commented on the work that has been referenced from outside the field of higher education:

The most direct link is the work that's been done on corporate boards and directors. I think that's very helpful. The second area where there has been a lot of work is on social systems and group performance…That also has been very helpful in the work we've done. Third, I think we…benefited a lot from work that has been done on strategy and change because boards, at least in theory, focus on issues of strategy and organizational culture [and] organizational change. Actually, organizational culture is another vein of research. Finally,…cognition. How do [trustees] think and how do they conceptualize?

Until more board-specific knowledge becomes available in higher education, relying on other sectors to inform board scholarship is vital. These other areas leverage theoretical advances despite contextual differences between the sectors.

Dr. Downs offers an interesting addition to the conversation to interrogate not only the methodological and theoretical approaches to studying governance and trusteeship but also to strategically consider who does the research. She recommends, "So I think you'll really need people that can get into the nitty-gritty of data and that are going to have concrete critiques and pushback." She continues that she would like to have researchers ask, "'Where are the numbers?' Give me disaggregated data… That should be the operative…They should be highly critical." Her comments bring us full circle with Dr. Robins' push for more critical theoretical frames.

In thinking of the ways theory and methodology can be expanded, Dr. Robins highlights that more knowledge in this area is needed as "…research plays an important role in…what…we know about board effectiveness overall and how they can use research to inform their practice as board members." Or, as spoken by Dr. Carter, "Boards are the key because it's where, at least from an organizational structure standpoint, we see…change occurring." Together, the logistical, theoretical, and methodological shortcomings of current board scholarship lead to one major finding—boards matter for the future of higher education, and if improvements are to be made for higher education stakeholders, more robust knowledge of the board is integral. To promote high-functioning boards and ensure effective institutions that serve students well, it is necessary to contemplate how future research might be augmented. While we believe that board research can be updated and augmented across a wide spectrum, specific and pressing issues may warrant more immediate attention. We expand upon some of these categories in the next section.

Future Research and Implications

Higher education governance has been tied to the public good (Tierney, 2006). Indeed, boards have a fiduciary duty to render decisions in the best interest of the campuses they govern and those that inhabit those campuses (McGuinness Jr, 1997). Therefore, the future of higher education is entrusted to these entities during these consequential times (Kezar, 2006). Despite the changes and challenges that require boards to do more and be more than they have in the past, minimal scholarship has been conducted in the last few decades to guide these pivotal decision-makers (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). We offer possibilities for future developments in research foci, theory and epistemology, and methodology in the area of higher education boards.

Research Focus Advancements

Even the areas where basic knowledge of boards exists can be reimagined. Despite increased knowledge in the area, the need for more, better, and multifaceted data related to higher education boards remains. For example, instead of simply focusing on board composition, more scholarship is required to investigate why certain groups have been historically underrepresented on boards or the implications of limited board diversity on decision making (Rall et al., forthcoming). Equity-related topics—the benefits of diversity, the board's role in supporting equity on campuses, board interactions with the chief diversity officer—all warrant additional study. Though there is some scholarship on specific populations on the board like students (Rall & Maxey, 2020; Lozano, 2016; Lozano & Hughes, 2017), or faculty (Ehrenberg and Patterson 2013), the differing experiences of board members of various classifications and identities (e.g., alumni, board chairs, women, etc.) is also worthy of exploration. More work within different board contexts like Minority Serving Institutions (Commodore, 2018) and religiously affiliated institutions (Prusak, 2018) can offer much-needed insight into the nuances of the trusteeship.

It is also necessary to explore the role and influence of boards related to critical issues, institutional needs, and decision-making. Exploration of the board's role is required at multiple levels. Akin to Neumann and Bensimon (1990), which studied college presidents' images of their leadership roles, similar work could explore trustees' images of themselves. The board's role in the larger local, state, regional, and national policy context (Morgan, LePeau, & Commodore, 2021; Tandberg, 2013) has also gained some interest and should continue. Facets of board selection (Dika & Janosik, 2003), appointment (Adamu, 2019), evaluation (Ingram & Weary, 2000; Kooli, 2019), and approaches to decision making in times of conflict, scandal, and crisis (Tierney & Rall, 2018), would also make valuable contributions. Ultimately, because the aim is to use research to improve board outcomes, it will be critical to link board member characteristics and board decisions (e.g., Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2003) to illustrate the importance of board effectiveness. Moreover, it is imperative to ascertain whether boards are doing their job (accountability), doing it well (efficiency and effectiveness), and the implications of their role for higher education and beyond (impact).

Epistemological and Theoretical Advancements

While some scholarship makes epistemological assumptions transparent (Rall et al., 2019), governance research and researchers rarely disclose their epistemological assumptions (Patton, 2016). The lack of transparency limits the potential richness of engaging governing board research from different paradigms with unique aims, approaches, and ways of presenting data. For instance, more critical studies bent on understanding how boards exert their privileges and perpetuate stratification (Rall et al. 2020) are different than pragmatic studies focused on relaying how boards engage in their normative work (Slaughter et al., 2014). Therefore, much might be gained by first making researchers' epistemology more transparent.

Some practical facets create real challenges for board research. Participants expressed concern regarding more theoretical barriers to enhancing understanding of higher education boards. Conducting studies on governing boards that use different theoretical lenses is required, and boards must be examined via frames that previously were not as readily accepted in higher education. Theories that center power, social capital, and other critical topics would contribute to more robust board research. Studies that apply leadership, learning, political, and decision-making theories can offer more insight into the interworkings of the board and, therefore, should be pursued. Specific examples include groupthink (Janis, 1971), cultural-historical activity theory (Roth & Lee, 2007), and standpoint theory (Smith, 1997). Supplementary research like Ray's theory of racialized organizations (2019) that bridges organizational theory and racial considerations could make meaningful and novel contributions in the governance literature.

Past researchers have looked beyond the theoretical confines of education to apply business and sociological aspects to higher education leadership (e.g., Clark, 1972). This theoretical application external to education needs to continue. While these different disciplines have their own intricacies, some aspects may be applicable.

Methodological Advancements

The themes outlined in the findings evince the need to figure out how to better approach and acquire scholarship in this area. The way we approached the topic by interviewing governance scholars was one novel approach. While information can be learned from literature reviews and empirical articles, engaging with those engrossed in this work is essential. The study participants explicate the need for better access, more emphasis and concern, expanded methodological and theoretical considerations, additional scholars to pursue the work, and heightened recognition that boards matter and are related to the expanse of the academy. Dr. Robins shared that because "…governance influences so many different areas of higher education…better understanding boards should be a priority overall."

Research must extend beyond traditional case studies that investigate one or two boards. How boards are researched matters, and therefore, based on knowledge of the present body of literature, future research needs to implement phenomenologies, ethnographies, narratives, and grounded theory to better understand this critical area

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, research must consider the individual trustee, the collective board, and their interaction with other governance actors within these types of inquiry. Advancements must be made with board members, staff, and institutions to understand the value and importance of board research so that we have a better sense of how boards interact with these key stakeholders. Making inroads with campus constituencies will help facilitate trust and entrée into a field in dire need of research expansion.

We offer specific ideas for extensions in the topical, theoretical, and methodological knowledge of boards below. More studies that examine boards at the institution, system, and state level are needed. Additional methodologies that build upon interviews would add to the literature. For example, in the same spirit of Posselt's (2016) work, multi-institution ethnographies that allow for keeping institutions anonymous would be additive. As there are increasing interests in and concerns about board composition and diversity, there is also a need to classify board members' identities. Whether via surveys or interviews, it would be helpful to have a sense of the racial, gender, professional, SES, etc., makeup of trustees, and potential intersections of said identities beyond surveys that rely on one respondent on behalf of the board as in AGB's composition survey. Presently, there is no comprehensive way to know how board members self-identify and how descriptively representative the board is of its constituency.

The work of boards necessarily comes with legal and moral codes that must be followed. Done properly, rigorous research does not have to compromise these standards. Taken together, expanded research topics, epistemological and theoretical approaches, and methodological advancements stand to extend our current knowledge of boards. Progress in these areas may improve effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of higher education governance. Additional empirical research on governing boards has the potential to contribute to an enhanced understanding of boards and their role in society (Maxey, 2015). Recent research that has permeated the barriers to studying topics such as the college presidency (Beardsley 2017) and admissions practices (Posselt, 2016) are encouraging approaches. These studies demonstrate that research needs to also inform practice and policy. For example, additional board research may support and promote construction and transparency of institutions' board rosters over time to facilitate longitudinal research by colleges and universities, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), or other entities. There is no shortage of areas where governance scholars can make necessary and impactful contributions in the trusteeship space.

Conclusion

More research is needed to understand complex and multifaceted areas within higher education, such as governance (Jones, 2011). However, our paper focuses on understanding more about why research thus far has been so limited in scope. Our goal was to expand scholarship in this area in novel ways. Increased scholarly attention to all facets of higher education governance—the individuals, decisions, processes, and performance—warrant much attention. With greater clarity around the

reasons governance research has been inadequate, we hope to catalyze the pursuit of more comprehensive scholarship. As more board-related studies are initiated, trustee scholarship will increase and provide crucial data on decision-making in higher education.

As one of our participants, Dr. Hill, shared: "…understanding governance and researching governance is essential to how we understand higher education and so many of the issues that we care about in higher education." The lack of literature in this area is an academic blind spot that translates to a practice gap. This body of decision-makers is far too influential for us to remain content with inadequate knowledge.

Acknowledging much progress can be made in board research is a critical, necessary, but inadequate step to advance scholarship and action related to these pivotal decision makers. Researchers should continue to build off of past scholarship by looking to more expansive methods and methodologies, samples, theoretical approaches, and topics within and outside the academy to enhance the understanding of governing boards. Interest in and information on this topic is all the more critical as boards increasingly make decisions that have far-reaching impacts in a higher education environment addressing pandemics, crises, controversies, change, and high turnover (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Scholars must find a way to provocatively permeate the restrictions of research and knowledge in this vital area to unlock board scholarship so that board literature knows no bounds.

Data availability Authors will maintain anonymized data; only researchers authorized via IRB will have access to the data.

Code Availability Not Applicable.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study was approved by Old Dominion University's IRB.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

Consent for Publication Patients signed informed consent regarding publishing their data.

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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