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Does Your Board of Trustees Reflect Your Student Body?

University boards claim to care about diversity on campus, but they seldom reveal how diverse they are. We disclosed the numbers for them.

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Christopher Kennedy, center, then chairman of the University Of Illinois Board of Trustees, presides over a meeting of the board Friday, March 23, 2012, in Chicago. Do governing boards, whether for a single institution, multiple campuses, or an entire state system, practice what they

preach when it comes to diversity? (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

American colleges and universities care deeply—or at least claim to care—about the diversity of their student bodies. When the U.S. Supreme Court last fall agreed to hear cases on affirmative action at Harvard and the University of North Carolina, many higher education institutions and trade associations signed amicus briefs in support of race-conscious admissions policies, and then disagreed vigorously when the justices invalidated those practices in a 6–3 decision in June.

But does concern about diversity extend to the boards of trustees that govern colleges and universities? Do governing boards, whether for a single institution, multiple campuses, or an entire state system, practice what they preach? It's an important question, because boards of trustees (sometimes called regents or visitors) appoint the school's president and together with that leader shape institutional strategy, budgetary priorities, and organizational values. These decisions affect students on multiple fronts, from admissions policies to academic programs, tuition and fees, and campus climate.

It stands to reason that the more the demography of a board mirrors the demography of the student body, the more likely it is that the college will solicit and appreciate the perspectives of all its students and endeavor to create equitable opportunities and outcomes for them.

Surprisingly, however, data on the diversity of college boards of trustees is not publicly posted or otherwise readily available. As a first step to determine the race and gender of trustees, we examined the websites and public records of a representative sample of 100 institutions drawn from the top, middle, and bottom of the *Washington Monthly's* 2022 college rankings. We then compared these numbers with the gender and racial composition of each school's undergraduate student enrollment as collected annually by the U.S. Department of Education database and publicly available through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). As a final step, we ranked the schools based on the degree to which the demographics of the boards and the students were aligned.

To be considered *well* aligned (19 institutions), the match between the demographics of the board and the students had to be within 10 percent of one another on *both* gender and race; *somewhat* aligned boards (58 institutions) had a match between 50 and 90 percent; and *poorly* aligned boards (23 institutions) had a match of less than 50 percent.

(You can view the rankings at the bottom of this page or at [this link](#).)

Here's what the numbers reveal:

Politics matters. Perhaps the most noteworthy, but predictable, finding is that colleges in reliably Democratic (blue) states have boards that are more demographically aligned with their student bodies than colleges in reliably Republican (red) states. Of the 19 well-aligned institutions, 14 are in blue states and five are in purple states—Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin, which fluctuate between Republican and Democratic electoral victories. By contrast, 12 of the 23 poorly aligned schools are in red states, four in purple states, and seven in blue states.

It is not hard to guess why this might be the case, at least for public institutions. At almost all public four-year colleges and universities, governors appoint the trustees. Unsurprisingly, governors tend to choose trustees who share their views and support their policies and priorities, which, in turn, represent the views of the voters who elected them. In general, Democrats have a more racially diverse, more liberal constituency, and, therefore, governors in blue states are more apt to appoint women and people of color to college and university boards. In contrast, Republicans depend heavily on conservative white voters, a political reality reflected in fewer diverse appointments.

One might not expect to see such differences at private institutions, where electoral politics does not play a role in trustee selection. At most private colleges and universities, trustees are selected and approved by the incumbent board, with the rest elected or nominated by alumni or appointed by denominational authorities. Yet our data shows that there was not great variation in board alignment between private and public institutions. Nine private and 10 public institutions were well aligned; 19 public and 39 private schools were somewhat aligned; and 8 public and 15 private institutions were poorly aligned. The geographic pattern among public and private colleges was very similar: College and university boards in blue states are more aligned with their student bodies than boards in red states. The bottom line is that the degree of alignment at both public and private colleges generally reflects the state's political leanings. As Tip O'Neill, former speaker of the house, famously observed, "All politics is local."

Quality matters. Sixteen of the 19 well-aligned institutions have a six-year graduation rate above the national average of 62 percent. By comparison, nine of the 23 poorly aligned institutions have graduation rates below the national average. Moreover, of the 19 well-aligned schools, 17 are highly ranked (in the top 50) by the *Washington Monthly*. By contrast, none of the schools sampled from the *Washington Monthly*'s lowest ranks has a well-aligned board, although a few highly ranked institutions (e.g., Brigham Young University and the University of Florida) have poorly aligned boards.

Many factors influence quality, such as selectivity in admissions, available resources, and faculty competence. The role boards play cannot be easily untangled, but the overall patterns on these two indices of quality suggest, at the very least, that well-aligned boards, more often than poorly aligned boards, are associated with institutions that have favorable outcomes and ratings.

Gender, race, and power matter. Among the 100 sampled institutions, there is greater disparity on gender than race between board composition and undergraduate enrollment. Only 20 schools are well aligned on gender, versus 31 on race; 29 schools are poorly aligned on gender, versus 22 on race.

That the gender diversity numbers are worse does not mean that the numbers on race are satisfactory. Still, it's worth asking: *Why* are the gender numbers worse?

One possibility: In 2022, only 24 percent of U.S. governors were women and 33 percent of college presidents were women. These numbers mean that the appointing authority (the governor) at public institutions and an influential voice in trustee selection at private colleges (the president) are overwhelmingly male.

A second potential explanation is that there is a lag between the increase in women going to college—their enrollment started outpacing men's around 1980 and now stands at 57 percent—and their appointment to college boards. In 2020, women made up 37 percent of public college trustees, up from 29 percent in 2000, and 36 percent of private ones, up from 29 percent in 2000. The gap has closed, but nowhere near the point of representation equal to female enrollments. To compound the situation, about half of all public and one-quarter of all private colleges do not set a maximum number of years or terms a trustee may serve, which limits turnover and opportunities to diversify the board.

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We have a hunch that there's a third factor at work. If the proportion of women on boards equaled the percentage of enrolled women, female trustees would be in the majority. Currently, men on average make up about two-thirds of the members of both public and private boards. A majority-female board would produce a profound transfer of power and a notably different atmosphere in the boardroom. Most people do not voluntarily cede power or embrace change, so incumbent trustees may well seek, consciously or not, to perpetuate the status quo regarding the board's demographic composition.

Unlike the case with women, if the percentage of Black and Hispanic trustees were proportional to student enrollment, trustees of color would still constitute a comparatively small fraction of the board. There would be two African Americans, for instance, on an average-size public board of 12 members, and four Black members out of 28 on the average-size private board. To be blunt, these numbers will not materially alter the demography of the dominant players or the norms of the dominant culture, whereas a majority-female board

would. This might further explain why the numbers on gender are worse than the numbers on race—the stakes are higher for the current power structure.

Board diversity should not and probably cannot be mandated by law, especially in light of the Supreme Court's recent decision on affirmative action. Rather, boards should diversify as a matter of institutional self-interest. Other kinds of boards are exploring what intentionally diversifying might look like. In the years ahead, women will remain a substantial majority, and students of color will make up a greater fraction of the “customer base.” Projections from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicate that between 2017 and 2028 there will be a 14 percent increase in Hispanic students, an 8 percent increase in Black students, and a 6 percent decrease in white students. As a result, trustees will need to be more attentive and responsive to the experiences and concerns of students of color. A board demographically similar to the student population will probably be more inclined and better positioned to do so.

While mandates that college boards be more diverse are probably unlawful as well as unwise, the U.S. Department of Education, in the interest of greater transparency and accountability, should require that every college submit data on the demographic composition of their board and the degree of alignment with their undergraduate population as part of the annual, publicly accessible IPEDS survey. This requirement would be a minimal burden on colleges but would unveil important information about each school's governing body. Ironically, demographic data on the boards of publicly traded companies is much more accessible. For example, Nasdaq now requires that listed companies disclose composite data on the gender, race, and LGBTQ status of the company's board. Additionally, boards of Nasdaq-listed companies must, with certain exceptions, have at least two diverse board members or explain why that's not the case.

Boards that espouse the virtues of diversity should themselves exemplify diversity. Inescapably, the composition of a board of trustees signals the intensity of an institution's commitment to diversity at the top of the organizational pyramid. Reality needs to match rhetoric.

There are other benefits to disclosure of demographic data. First, the information would enable researchers to study the interplay between the composition of boards of trustees and the schools' policies, priorities, practices, and outcomes. Second, the data would interest and benefit journalists and the media more generally. Publications like the *Washington Monthly* might even add board and student diversity alignment as a factor in calculating rankings. Third, the data could inform public debate and elections and, by extension, precipitate new criteria and procedures for trustee appointments to state colleges and universities. And, finally, published numbers would highlight leaders and laggards on alignment among

all institutions and, just maybe, nudge (or shame) the laggards to become better aligned.

Boards that espouse the virtues of diversity should themselves exemplify diversity. Inescapably, the composition of a board of trustees signals the intensity of an institution's commitment to diversity at the top of the organizational pyramid. Reality needs to match rhetoric for boards to have the credibility and moral authority to govern effectively.

At this early stage of research on board diversity, we do not know exactly how or if a well-aligned board enhances the overall quality of an institution or the students' education and experience. Additional research and time will be required to see whether—and, if so, how—board and student alignment impacts institutional performance and culture. But so far, the upside seems significant without any obvious downside.

Likewise, we do not yet know precisely and definitively how and why some boards are well aligned with student demographics while other boards are not. However, we do know that roughly one-fifth of the schools we examined have achieved that objective. So, we have proof of concept. The goal is attainable; excuses are suspect.

WHICH COLLEGE BOARDS LOOK LIKE THEIR STUDENTS?

- well aligned
- somewhat aligned
- poorly aligned

		Overall alignment between trustees & undergrads, where 1.0 is perfect alignment*			Alignment between trustees & undergrads by gender		Six-year graduation rate (2020–21)		Percent above or below the 62% national average graduation rate		Washington Monthly ranking of school	
1	CALIFORNIA STATE UNIV. MARITIME ACADEMY (CA)	2.14	2.91	1.37	66.80%	3.80%	1 (bachelor's)					
2	Montserrat College of Art (MA)	1.34	0.54	2.13	55.10%	-7.90%	254 (bachelor's)					
3	Harvard University (MA)	1.28	1.10	1.46	97.10%	34.10%	6 (national)					
4	Michigan State University (MI)	1.25	1.46	1.05	80.80%	17.80%	48 (national)					
5	Ohio Northern University (OH)	1.25	0.95	1.56	77.30%	14.30%	2 (bachelor's)					
6	University of Wisconsin–Madison (WI)	1.15	0.72	1.57	88%	25%	16 (national)					
7	Lehigh University (PA)	1.07	0.87	1.27	90%	27%	37 (national)					
8	University of Minnesota–Twin Cities (MN)	1.03	0.77	1.30	83%	20%	39 (national)					
9	Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (VA)	1.03	1.25	0.80	85.50%	22.50%	28 (national)					
10	Princeton University (NJ)	1.02	1.13	0.91	97.90%	34.90%	4 (national)					
11	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MA)	1.01	1.03	1.00	95.40%	32.40%	3 (national)					
12	University of Washington–Seattle Campus (WA)	1.00	0.81	1.20	82%	19%	19 (national)					
13	University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign (IL)	1.00	1.09	0.92	85.10%	22.10%	17 (national)					
14	Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art (NY)	1.00	0.94	1.05	91.40%	28.40%	3 (bachelor's)					
15	Brown University (RI)	0.99	0.92	1.07	95.60%	32.60%	40 (national)					
16	Washington State University (WA)	0.94	1.22	0.67	59.80%	-3.20%	46 (national)					
17	James Madison University (VA)	0.94	0.75	1.14	84.10%	21.10%	51 (national)					
18	California State University–Fresno (CA)	0.92	0.93	0.90	56.30%	-6.70%	36 (national)					
19	Wesleyan University (CT)	0.91	0.82	1.01	91.60%	28.60%	3 (liberal arts)					
20	Beacon College (FL)	0.88	1.37	0.40	63%	0%	256 (bachelor's)					
21	College of Wooster (OH)	0.88	0.77	0.98	77.40%	14.40%	100 (liberal arts)					
22	California State University–San Bernardino (CA)	0.88	0.95	0.81	55.20%	-7.80%	43 (national)					
23	Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico–Orlando (FL)	0.87	0.73	1.01	84.40%	21.40%	255 (bachelor's)					
24	George Washington University (DC)	0.87	0.75	0.99	82.30%	19.30%	44 (national)					
25	University of Phoenix–Arizona (AZ)	0.87	0.29	1.45	27%	-36%	413 (national)					
26	California State University–East Bay (CA)	0.86	0.92	0.80	79.10%	16.10%	153 (national)					
27	Dartmouth College (NH)	0.86	1.03	0.70	94.80%	31.80%	12 (national)					
28	University of California–San Diego (CA)	0.84	0.84	0.84	87.30%	24.30%	20 (national)					
29	University of Notre Dame (IN)	0.84	0.84	0.83	95.90%	32.90%	10 (national)					
30	University of California–Berkeley (CA)	0.81	0.78	0.85	92.50%	29.50%	9 (national)					
31	Wofford College (SC)	0.81	0.65	0.97	85.20%	22.20%	98 (liberal arts)					
32	Stanford University (CA)	0.80	0.92	0.68	94.30%	31.30%	1 (national)					
33	Walden University (MN)	0.80	0.50	1.09	31.60%	-31.40%	433 (national)					
34	University of California–Los Angeles (CA)	0.79	0.72	0.87	91.50%	28.50%	21 (national)					
35	University of California–Davis (CA)	0.78	0.69	0.87	86.70%	23.70%	11 (national)					
36	Yale University (CT)	0.78	0.59	0.97	97.30%	34.30%	7 (national)					

37	North Carolina A&T State University (NC)	0.78	0.56	1.00	50%	-13%	152 (national)
38	Pomona College (CA)	0.77	0.87	0.67	93.40%	30.40%	2 (liberal arts)
39	Duke University (NC)	0.76	0.85	0.68	94.60%	31.60%	5 (national)
40	Georgetown University (DC)	0.76	0.54	0.99	95%	32%	15 (national)
41	Marymount Manhattan College (NY)	0.75	0.97	0.53	52.60%	-10.40%	199 (liberal arts)
42	Berea College (KY)	0.75	0.63	0.86	68.40%	5.40%	5 (liberal arts)
43	Howard University (DC)	0.74	0.52	0.96	64.80%	1.80%	370 (national)
44	Washington and Lee University (VA)	0.73	0.55	0.90	94.40%	31.40%	4 (liberal arts)
45	William & Mary (VA)	0.72	0.64	0.80	90.10%	27.10%	45 (national)
46	Cornell University (NY)	0.71	0.80	0.63	94.50%	31.50%	8 (national)
47	University of California–Merced (CA)	0.71	0.80	0.63	69.40%	6.40%	49 (national)
48	University of Akron–Main Campus (OH)	0.71	0.56	0.85	46%	-17%	438 (national)
49	Texas Woman's University (TX)	0.69	1.03	0.36	70.20%	7.20%	162 (national)
50	Columbia University in the City of New York (NY)	0.68	0.55	0.81	94.80%	31.80%	25 (national)
51	University of Hawaii at Hilo (HI)	0.68	0.42	0.93	42.20%	-20.80%	192 (national)
52	Claflin University (SC)	0.67	0.58	0.77	50%	-13%	101 (liberal arts)
53	Sacred Heart University (CT)	0.66	0.47	0.85	73.10%	10.10%	400 (national)
54	University of Hawaii–West Oahu (HI)	0.66	0.40	0.91	45.90%	-17.10%	132 (bachelor's)
55	Boston College (MA)	0.65	0.72	0.57	94.40%	31.40%	35 (national)
56	East-West University (IL)	0.64	0.13	1.15	6.50%	-56.50%	201 (liberal arts)
57	Soka University of America (CA)	0.64	0.43	0.84	89.40%	26.40%	102 (liberal arts)
58	Florida International University (FL)	0.62	0.44	0.79	73.90%	10.90%	32 (national)
59	Northwestern University (IL)	0.62	0.72	0.51	93.80%	30.80%	30 (national)
60	Arizona State University Campus Immersion (AZ)	0.61	1.01	0.22	66%	3%	50 (national)
61	Illinois Wesleyan University (IL)	0.60	0.44	0.77	77%	14%	4 (bachelor's)
62	Beulah Heights University (GA)	0.60	0.41	0.78	25%	-38%	203 (liberal arts)
63	South Florida Bible College and Theological Seminary (FL)	0.59	0.41	0.78	60%	-3%	253 (bachelor's)
64	Birmingham-Southern College (AL)	0.59	0.60	0.58	69.40%	6.40%	200 (liberal arts)
65	University of Arkansas–Fort Smith (AR)	0.58	0.57	0.59	35.90%	-27.10%	130 (bachelor's)
66	University of Michigan–Ann Arbor (MI)	0.57	0.74	0.39	93.30%	30.30%	26 (national)
67	Vanderbilt University (TN)	0.56	0.55	0.58	92.90%	29.90%	29 (national)
68	Loyola Marymount University (CA)	0.55	0.75	0.35	79.40%	16.40%	230 (national)
69	National Louis University (IL)	0.54	0.55	0.53	56.20%	-6.80%	18 (national)
70	University of Chicago (IL)	0.53	0.44	0.63	79.40%	16.40%	41 (national)
71	Johns Hopkins University (MD)	0.53	0.57	0.49	92.90%	29.90%	23 (national)
72	New School (NY)	0.53	0.47	0.59	81.60%	18.60%	435 (national)
73	University of Pennsylvania (PA)	0.52	0.53	0.52	96.10%	33.10%	2 (national)
74	Andrews University (MI)	0.51	0.35	0.67	55.80%	-7.20%	439 (national)
75	University of Central Florida (FL)	0.51	0.56	0.46	75.90%	12.90%	47 (national)
76	Washington University in St. Louis (MO)	0.50	0.47	0.53	94.10%	31.10%	27 (national)
77	Rutgers University–Newark (NJ)	0.50	0.55	0.45	68.20%	5.20%	38 (national)
78	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (NC)	0.49	0.28	0.70	90.50%	27.50%	24 (national)
79	Hofstra University (NY)	0.49	0.54	0.43	64.80%	1.80%	434 (national)
80	South University–Montgomery (AL)	0.48	0.59	0.37	18.40%	-44.60%	129 (bachelor's)
81	St. Thomas University (FL)	0.48	0.31	0.65	75.30%	12.30%	440 (national)

82	Pennsylvania State University (PA)	0.48	0.46	0.50	70.70%	7.70%	175 (national)
83	Texas A&M University–College Station (TX)	0.48	0.21	0.74	81.40%	18.40%	42 (national)
84	Harvey Mudd College (CA)	0.47	0.53	0.41	91.70%	28.70%	1 (liberal arts)
85	Erskine College (SC)	0.47	0.69	0.24	44.50%	-18.50%	441 (national)
86	Dean College (MA)	0.46	0.52	0.41	41.80%	-21.20%	252 (bachelor's)
87	Carnegie Mellon University (PA)	0.45	0.38	0.52	80.00%	17.00%	34 (national)
88	University of Virginia–Main Campus (VA)	0.41	0.31	0.51	94.70%	31.70%	31 (national)
89	Utah State University (UT)	0.41	0.82	0.00	52.60%	-10.40%	22 (national)
90	Drew University (NJ)	0.40	0.46	0.34	69.20%	6.20%	99 (liberal arts)
91	Mississippi College (MS)	0.40	0.19	0.61	56.40%	-6.60%	442 (national)
92	University of Maine at Presque Isle (ME)	0.37	0.74	0.00	39.60%	-23.40%	128 (bachelor's)
93	California Institute of Technology (CA)	0.36	0.41	0.32	93.60%	30.60%	14 (national)
94	King's College (NY)	0.35	0.17	0.52	52.80%	-10.20%	202 (liberal arts)
95	Pepperdine University (CA)	0.32	0.41	0.23	86.10%	23.10%	228 (national)
96	University of Florida (FL)	0.29	0.59	0.00	88.20%	25.20%	33 (national)
97	Southeastern University (FL)	0.22	0.14	0.30	38.70%	-24.30%	437 (national)
98	University of Arkansas at Little Rock (AR)	0.19	0.16	0.23	43.10%	-19.90%	436 (national)
99	College of the Ozarks (MO)	0.18	0.36	0.00	69.30%	6.30%	5 (bachelor's)
100	Brigham Young University (UT)	0.16	0.33	0.00	64.40%	1.40%	13 (national)

NOTE: Board/student diversity alignment for a sample of 100 institutions drawn from the top, middle, and bottom of the Washington Monthly's 2022 College Rankings.

*If the percentage of undergraduate women and students of color is exactly the same as the percentage of women and people of color on the board of trustees, the institution receives a score of 1.0.

An institution with an alignment score over 1.0 has a higher percentage of women trustees and trustees of color than women students and students of color.

An institution with an alignment score under 1.0 has a lower percentage of women trustees and trustees of color than women students and students of color.

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