

I, too, am a lead(Her): The Power and Possibilities of Women of Color on Governing Boards of Higher Education in California

Raquel M. Rall

University of California, Riverside

Valeria Orué

University of California, Riverside

Journal of Higher Education Management, 35(1), 32-39 (ISSN 2640-7515). © Copyright 2020 by AAUA—American Association of University Administrators. Permission to reprint for academic/scholarly purposes is unrestricted provided this statement appears on all duplicated copies. All other rights reserved.

I, Too

by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes, "I, Too" from **The Collected Works of Langston Hughes**. (1994)

National demographic shifts have highlighted the need to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion within higher education (Rall, Morgan, & Commodore, forthcoming). Despite ongoing conversations, higher education leadership remains dominated by white men—from the board to institution heads to faculty, etc. (AGB, 2017; Bustillos & Siqueiros, 2018). Not only are boards dominated by white men, but board scholarship is dominated by white male scholars. Current leading theories like organizational theory, principal-agent theory, and others leave little consideration for the voice of the “other” on the board. Higher education governance has been undertheorized because there has not been a need to consider marginalized voices on boards. In order to better understand the potential for systemic change in this area, we must analyze the larger environment in which boards function (Tierney & Rall, 2018).

Unfortunately, boards of higher education have been markedly absent from the equity conversation in higher education (Rall, Morgan, & Commodore, 2018), and research on women and Women of Color in management, leadership, and administration in higher education is lacking (Waring, 2003). Moreover, there is a dearth of studies that examine how race *and* gender interact to inform leadership in this space (Byrd, 2009; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Stanley, 2009). Although women have increased their representation in leadership positions within higher education since the late 1980s, they are still

outnumbered more than two-to-one on public and private governing boards (Johnson, 2016). Additional research indicates that though women have been surpassing men in the academic attainment for many years, this has not meant advanced outcomes in their professional lives (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018; NCES, 2019). This “achievement” gap is

even more prevalent when we account for race and note that Women of Color (WoC)¹ are further marginalized in comparison to their white male and female counterparts (Johnson, 2016; NCES, 2018; NCES, 2019).

The influential role of boards makes them crucial to ensuring that higher education maintains its commitment to upholding standards of community and inclusivity, yet, board diversity has been of little concern to higher education scholars (Pusser, Slaughter, & Thomas, 2006). Just 32% of both public and private boards are made up of people identifying as women and only 23% of public boards are made up of racial/ethnic minorities; that number falls to just 17% when extracting minority-serving institutions from the pool (Association of Governing Boards [AGB], 2017). Within California, the UC Board of Regents is 62% white and 73% male; the CSU Board of Trustees is 70% white and 65% male, and the CCC Board of Governors is 77% white and 59% male (Bustillos & Siqueiros, 2018). Nationwide, boards of higher education remain homogeneous along lines of race/ethnicity and gender, and a persistent challenge in higher education is how to expand the number of women in leadership positions (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

The purpose of this paper is to dismantle the narrative that we are successfully diversifying boards by adding women to the equation, without also taking into consideration the racial and ethnic backgrounds of those elected to represent the voices of our communities. We investigate how gender, and necessarily, the intersection of gender and race, is considered (or not) within higher education governance literature. By allowing ourselves to see this as both an issue of race *and* gender, we can inform the decision-making process to push for equity and inclusion from the top-down. This paper is part of a larger study where we conducted a systematic analysis of articles published in outlets that have published research on governing boards in the U.S. from 1970 until today. We examined governance scholarship for the application of theoretical frameworks. Simultaneously we examined the demographic changes over time within the 3 major public systems of higher education in California from inception to today. The juxtaposition of theoretical application and demographics revealed that governance continues to ignore gender and racial equity in these pivotal positions. In this paper, we build off of this review to add the voices of women board members to further highlight the need to center the role, experience, and historical exclusion of women (with emphasis on WoC), on the board.

We first introduce the theoretical foundation for this work by bridging critical race feminism and the homogeneity of governing boards to highlight how the most powerful decision-making body in higher education has managed to exclude WoC. We then introduce the voices of several female trustees, most of which, are of color to further illuminate the imperative for expanding our knowledge of who is represented on the board, and how they experience their roles on the board. Next, we debunk the pipeline myth in higher education and make the case for diversified appointments based on the qualifications of women. We conclude with ideas for the future of higher education research on boards that centers both gender and race.

Conceptual Framework – Critical Race Feminism

Today's issues of equity stem from a long history of exclusion of minoritized communities. Following the Civil Rights Movement, America adapted the concept of "color-blindness" to maintain that all men were equal under the law; this meant ignoring the racial differences and the

¹ We are fully aware that multiple populations are disproportionately represented on the board. For the purposes of this paper, though, we focus on Women of Color due to their double minority status.

history of injustice (Bell, 1995; Delgado, 1989; Khalifa, Dunbar, & Douglasb, 2013). Racism, Bell (1995) argues, is a silent covenant, that hides in the everyday interactions of people and enforces power dynamics through social, economic, and political oppression. The belief that Black individuals have the same opportunities offered to them as their white counterparts, fails to address the social construct that sets them back from the same starting line (Bell, 1995, 2004). To disrupt the self-constructed reality of white privilege and understand the struggle of minoritized groups, Delgado (1989) argues that we must listen to the “voice” of the oppressed. By allowing People of Color (PoC) to tell their stories, we can then begin to understand the power of privilege. This concept became one of the main tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the idea that counter-storytelling would bring forth a new perspective that has been traditionally unsolicited and hidden (Bell, 1995; Delgado, 1989; Khalifa, Dunbar, & Douglasb, 2013).

CRT allowed Men of Color (MoC) the opportunity to finally have their narratives heard, however, women were still not a part of the conversation (Crenshaw, 1991). It was the rise of feminism that allowed women the opportunity to fight for social mobility; this ideology was focused on the experiences of white women at the expense of WoC (Crenshaw, 1991; Wiggins, 2001). Crenshaw (1991) thus introduced the concept of intersectionality and argued that WoC faced dual marginalization from both their racial and gender identities. Using the same tenants of the CRT framework, Critical Race Feminism (CRF) emerged and became an opportunity for WoC to begin sharing their stories and unravel patterns of institutionalized oppression (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015). We introduce CRF as a theoretical framework to isolate, analyze, and vocalize the challenges that women face in higher education leadership roles.

I, Too, Matter

Women may encounter multiple layers of isolation within and barriers to accessing the highest levels of university decision-making (Johnson, 2016). Most oppression does not seem like oppression to the perpetrator (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); dominant groups justify their power with personal narratives or “stock explanations” that rationalize their oppression and maintain their positionality (Delgado, 1989). When women in leadership are vocalized, their stories can help challenge men’s self-constructed version of reality. These narratives create necessary jargon to conflict “unconscious” sexism in higher education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Take, for example, the words of a board member in California: “As a woman of color, I had several frustrating moments with respect to individuals attempting to speak over me, cut me off or outright bypass my comments completely.” Literature in higher education speaks to education as “property rights” stemmed from the vindication of slavery (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and argues that whites use this conceptualization to justify control over who gets afforded which privileges in society (Delgado, 1989). In this case, our participant’s comments are dismissed by the dominant group because they control what “property” is valuable through their “rights” to exclude (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CRF challenges that as a double minority, a woman has to convince both her male peers and white peers that her input (property) as a WoC is equally important (Crenshaw, 1991). The dominant group, however, will not see anything wrong with the dismissal because their “reality” of the situation is justified through embedded racism and sexism (Delgado, 1989, Crenshaw, 1991). This board member was not alone in this feeling, her counterpart within the state shared, “Meanwhile...the women were supportive and the men were generally dismissive. I recall asserting my position as a [board member] when the male staff members attempted to cut me off.” Even when

her title was more powerful than those who were there to help make her role on the board easier, this board member elucidates that many cannot see beyond gender.

As post-secondary institutions push for diversity, diverse voices are essential to inform boards of issues that affect the populations they serve. Without the informed perspective of a marginalized community, boards cannot hold themselves accountable for the needs of those not represented (Chesler & Crowfoot, 1989). Here we put forth the case of another board member who stresses the impact of sharing stories amongst her peers to help one another understand critical issues affecting marginalized groups:

“I learned so much about my peers, and their struggle to **GET** here and **STAY** here (*emphasis added by the participant*). It opened my eyes to the pervasive inequities that touch on race, sex, gender identity, religion, citizenship, and so much more. I learned how to interact and build genuine relationships with a cross-section of communities that I most likely wouldn't have engaged with otherwise.”

Crenshaw (1991) argues that WoC must account for various intersections of their identity, not just their gender. Her use of intersectionality helped frame CRF theory to understand the marginalization of WoC as complex individuals. By increasing diversity on boards, the intricacies of marginalized identities navigating higher education can become more visible, and in turn, be better understood.

The Pipeline Myth

Pipeline myths attribute the gaps in higher education leadership to the lack of qualified applicants and suggest that men are a better fit for these roles because they possess more appropriate credentials (Johnson, 2016), however recent data shows otherwise (Johnson, 2016; NCES 2018, 2019). Here a board member's testimonial describes what makes governance successful:

You have to understand the importance of vetting and appointing qualified people. By qualified people, I think you need diversity in male to female, race, but the one thing that's got to be constant regardless of the diversity is that they have been successful in whatever endeavors they've been involved in. The thing is you have to have people who are properly motivated and care about education and want to promote the system and make it the best...

Women have been making progress in education in order to succeed as professionals and be “qualified” leaders in society. Despite our argument to increase racial and gender representation on boards, as one participant stated, it is equally important to appoint *qualified* individuals to leadership roles. CRF suggests there are embedded forms of racial and gender biases in social, economic, and political systems through which WoC are excluded from having a seat at the table (Crenshaw, 1991). Governors and state leadership, who use “the pipeline” as an excuse for the lack of diversity in appointments, rather than explicitly acknowledge racism and sexism as embedded structural and systemic factors that hinder women's success, perpetuate the cycle.

Restructuring Board (H)igher (E)ducation (R)esearch Narratives

Research on boards of education is limited in nature (Burns, 1966; Martorana, 1963; Michael, Schwartz, & Hamilton, 1997; Russock, 1974), and there is a gap when it comes to understanding the unique contributions that women, and especially, Women of Color can make in higher educational leadership. The changing faces of leaders within higher education necessitate that researchers and practitioners use theoretical frameworks that are applicable to these groups (Brinson, 2006). Using CRF to guide our understanding of how boards of higher education have become so homogenous in representation, we interviewed female board members about their experiences in leadership to highlight how the theory manifests in real situations. The significance of this work is to disrupt the traditional narrative of white, male leaders who make decisions for an increasingly diverse population in academia.

Campus leadership plays a crucial role in the institution and can either establish a sense of belonging or a sense of exclusion for stakeholders (Bustillos & Siqueiros, 2018). Boards have the power to select university chancellors and presidents, and their decisions begin to trickle down the pipeline of educational leadership. Presidents have the power to diversify faculty, staff, and in turn, attract students who see themselves reflected in the institutional structure. When implemented correctly, the chain effect creates a vision of education being accessible and achievable to all students, regardless of their gender, race, or ethnic background. We focused on board members within California to explicate that these gender and racial challenges on the board are even palpable in the most diverse state in the U.S. The University of California (UC) Board of Regents, California State University (CSU) Board of Trustees, the California Community Colleges (CCC) Board of Governors, make decisions that impact all aspects of the student, staff, and faculty lives across the state.

Decades have long passed since both the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement in the U.S, yet the implications of the legal and social barriers are still felt today. It is time to dismantle the hierarchical standards that have kept women and WoC from being represented at every institutional level, starting with its most powerful decision-makers. The scholarship has taught us that we must scrutinize these inequalities through a CRF lens to understand the intricacies of race and gender in higher education leadership, and how power structures continue to dominate the way governing boards are selected. Using this research, we can push key stakeholders in each state to reflect on their own selection process of boards of trustees and make critically informed decisions that can foster institutional change and promote the learning environment of the colleges and universities they serve. With more women and Women of Color in a pivotal gatekeeping position such as members of governing boards, other essential leadership positions such as presidents, deans, and more might also see better gender and racial equity. The influential role of boards makes them crucial to ensuring that higher education maintains its commitment to upholding standards of community and inclusivity. Additional opportunities coupled with enhanced research and theoretical frames are essential to unlock the power and possibilities of women (and specifically, Women of Color) on governing boards of higher education.

**Note: We intentionally removed names (and even pseudonyms) for these women in this text in recognition of their extremely marginalized positions on the board. They were courageous enough to share their stories with us and it is our intention to keep their words intact without risk of them being identified or retaliated against in a space dominated by white males.*

Raquel M. Rall, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Higher Education, University of California, Riverside. She can be reached at raquel.rall@ucr.edu.

Valeria Orue is a PhD doctoral student at the University of California, Riverside. She can be reached at vorue001@ucr.edu.

References

- Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (2017). Pipelines, pathways, and institutional leadership: An update on the status of women in higher education. Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. Retrieved from <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/HES-Pipelines-Pathways-and -Institutional-Leadership-2017.pdf>.
- Bell, D. (1995). "Property rights in whiteness – their legal legacy, their economic costs." In *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, edited by R. Delgado, pp. 75–83. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bell, D. (2004). *Silent covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brinson, H. (2006). The effects of race and gender in organizational leadership success: A study of African American women and their challenges to become leaders in corporate America (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI 3457130).
- Burns, G. P. (1966). *Trustees in higher education: Their functions and coordination*. Washington, D.C.: Independent College Funds of America.
- Bustillos, L. T., & Siqueiros, M. (2018). Left out: How exclusion in California's colleges and universities hurts our values, our students, and our economy. *Campaign for College Opportunity*.
- Byrd, M. (2009). Theorizing African American women's leadership experiences: Socio-cultural theoretical alternatives. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 29(1), 2-19.
- Chesler, M.A., & Crowfoot, J. (1989). An organizational analysis of racism in higher education. In M. C. Brown (Eds.), *In Organization & Governance in Higher Education: An ASHE Reader Series*. (pp. 932-964). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299. doi:10.2307/1229039.
- Childers-McKee, C. D., & Hytten, K. (2015). Critical race feminism and the complex challenges of educational reform. *Urban Review*, 47, 393–412.
- Davis, D. R. (2012). A Phenomenological Study on the Leadership Development of African American Women Executives in Academia and Business. Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI 3553634).
- Davis, D. R., & Maldonado, C. (2015). Shattering the glass ceiling: The leadership development of African American women in higher education. *Advancing women in leadership*, 35, 48-64.
- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87(8), 2411-2441. doi:10.2307/1289308.

- Hughes, Langston, 1902-1967. (1994). The collected poems of Langston Hughes. New York, NY: Knopf. Distributed by Random House, 1994.
- Johnson, H. L. (2016). Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership: An Update on the Status of Women in Higher Education. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Khalifa, M., Dunbar, C. & Douglasb, T. (2013) Derrick bell, CRT, and educational leadership 1995–present. *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 16(4), 489-513, DOI: [10.1080/13613324.2013.817770](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.817770).
- Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97: 47–68.
- Martorana, S. V. (1963). College boards of trustees. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in Education.
- Michael, S.O., Schwartz, M., & Hamilton, A. (1997). Trustee selection/appointment and orientation: A comparative analysis of higher education sectors in Ohio. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 19(2), 111-128.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2018). Master's degrees conferred to females by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and field of study: 2015-16 and 2016-17 (Table No. 323.50). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_323.50.asp.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2018). Doctor's degrees conferred to females by postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity and field of study: 2015-16 and 2016-17 (Table No. 324.35). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_324.35.asp.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2019). Percentage distribution of master's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions in largest fields of study, by sex: Academic year 2016–17 (Figure 3). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctb.asp.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2019). Percentage distribution of doctor's degrees conferred by postsecondary institutions in largest fields of study, by sex: Academic year 2016–17 (Figure 6). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctb.asp.
- Pusher, B., Slaughter, S., & Thomas, S. L. (2006). Playing the board game: An empirical analysis of university trustee and corporate board interlocks. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 77(5), 747-775.
- Rall, R. M., Morgan, D. L., & Commodore, F. (2018). Invisible injustice: Higher education boards and issues of diversity, equity, and inclusivity. In R. Jeffries (Ed.), *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity in Contemporary Higher Education* (pp. 261-277). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-5724-1.ch016.
- Rall, R.M., Morgan, D.L., & Commodore, F. (forthcoming). Towards culturally sustaining governance: Best practices of theory, research, and practice. *The Journal of Education Human Resources*.
- Russock, R. (1974). Community College Trustees. *Community College Review*, 2(3), 57-62.
- Sanchez-Hucles, J. V., & Davis, D. D. (2010). Women and women of color in leadership: Complexity, identity, and intersectionality. *American Psychologist*, 65(3), 171.
- Stanley, C. (2009). Giving voice from the perspectives of African American women leaders. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 11(5), 551-561.
- Tierney, W. G., & Rall, R. M. (2018). Lessons not yet learned: Culture, governance, and the Jerry Sandusky case. *Journal of Higher Education Management*, 33(2), 12–27.
- Waring, A. (2003). African American female college presidents: Self-conceptions of leadership. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 31(14), 1 – 15.

Wiggins, M. (2001). The future of intersectionality and critical race feminism. *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues*, 11(2), 677-690.