

Modeling Equity-Minded Leadership amid Crisis: The Call for Higher Education Governing Boards to Lead the Way

Raquel M. Rall

University of California, Riverside

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Introduction

Early in 2020, COVID-19 pushed the academy to make changes large and small to meet the needs of its students. As institutions scrambled to respond to the pandemic, many staff members transitioned to working remotely; courses moved online; dorms closed; sports programs were postponed (and in some cases eliminated), and more. Higher education stakeholders looked to leaders for guidance, and these decision-makers often appeared hesitant and indecisive. The uncertainty is entrenched in questions that have long surrounded shared governance; in times before COVID-19, determining which governance actors oversaw various areas of the academy was difficult (Morphew, 1999). While changes in decision-making practices in higher education continue to unfold, sparse attention has been given to the implications of COVID-19 on postsecondary governance. The far-reaching and unprecedented influence of COVID-19 on higher education and beyond calls for a review of the strategic importance of governance, emphasizing the roles and responsibilities of board members.

The COVID-19 pandemic elucidates features of other major crises as well (MacTaggart, 2020). While COVID-19 posed a novel threat, the mainstays of racial justice and equity garnered much attention during this unprecedented time. As the country grappled with online learning and social distancing, deeply rooted racial tensions boiled over as the nation reacted to senseless killings of unarmed Black people like Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minnesota. The unexpected global pandemic would not eclipse the longstanding pandemic of racism and anti-blackness. The convergence of these two issues poses a particular challenge for higher education leadership. College and university leaders are center stage as institutional stakeholders watch as the implications of both pandemics continue to unravel. As critical decisions are made, it is essential to question the role of governance actors in addressing such challenges.

In this paper, the author discusses the influence and implications of COVID-19 and racial inequity on postsecondary governance to consider how governance actors' pivotal roles and responsibilities call for us to reconsider higher education policy and practice. This reimagining of possibilities must have an explicit focus on equity given historical and COVID-19 related disparities experienced by marginalized populations. The author conceptualizes the growing need for new insights and perspectives related to higher education decision-making in the era of COVID-19 that might empower college and university board members to govern with an eye on equity with knowledge and confidence. University governance is a collaborative venture that should be a reliable vehicle for accountability, innovation, and progress, whether in a pandemic or not. To overcome today's most pressing institutional challenges (e.g., inequity), governance needs to be centered. At the same time, COVID-19 has forced us to reimagine the traditional ideas of governance and how this established structure of institutional control "works." Changes in the higher education environment unearth new questions

regarding the form and function of governance, especially during pandemics. The dual pandemics of inequity and COVID-19 place a singular focus on governing boards.

Governance and Governing Boards

Governance describes the way policies and macro-level decision making occur within higher education. It is a broad way to refer to institutions' structures and processes to make decisions, assign rights and responsibilities, understand relationships, and make clear authority patterns (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2004). Boards of higher education, those entities that maintain the ultimate authority over higher education institutions (Kaplan, 2005), warrant specific attention within university governance and are an integral part of institutions' governance structures. Understanding the role and efficacy of boards in dealing with change has never been more crucial (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges [AGB], 2013; Davies, 2011; Hirsch & Weber, 2001; Kezar, 2006; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). However, most considerations of equity-related change are confined to the efforts of staff, faculty, and other campus stakeholders (Rall et al., 2020). Often left outside of critical conversations centering on race, governing boards do not know how to execute their role concerning equity-minded decision-making (Rall, 2020).

The reflective essay is used to contemplate paths for boards to guide and hold institutions accountable for influential circumstances in higher education, including equity-related initiatives and addressing crises such as those most recently manifest like COVID-19. Board members are needed now more than ever to recognize how their decisions affect not just policies and procedures but people. The board must be aware of how its decisions impact all people, but particularly those marginalized populations most severely and systematically disadvantaged by years of discrimination, racism, and prejudice. Decisions at the level of board governance invariably hold implications for marginalized groups; impacts on minoritized groups should be considered at every stage of decision-making to avoid unintended results. Board members can be difference-makers in addressing, pushing for, and assuring equity in higher education. Therefore, it is time for boards to purposefully enter and subsequently model and guide the equity conversation by focusing on inquiry and accountability at all times, but especially now in the wake of the pandemic. The academic leadership and governance strategies outlined to better promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) carry implications for policy and practice.

Governance Reconsidered: Priorities of the Trusteeship

Despite the essential tasks and roles assumed by boards of higher education, boards may not be well accustomed to lead amid crises and controversy. Based on the shared governance model, all legal authority in higher education originates from the governing board, but the board delegates most of this authority to the president, who then delegates authority over various parts of the university to other campus leaders (Olson, 2009). This delegation pattern does not mean that the board has all the knowledge, expertise, and experience necessary to execute that authority. Institutions need clear organizational strategies rooted in decisive and intentionally coordinated efforts to survive and flourish in the 21st century (OECD, 2003). Too often, and for too long, governing boards have been relegated to the sidelines of significant issues in higher education. The past decade has seen them forced into the headlines due to controversies at institutions like Penn State (Tierney & Rall, 2018), Michigan State (Méndez, 2020), and the University of Southern California (Ryan et al., 2018). 2020 again draws eyes to higher education boards not for what they did not do but for the potential of their actions. Making comparisons to what former USC president Steven Sample (2002) writes about with leadership, boards must shift from merely being trustees to actually doing the work of trusteeship. Gone are the days of

symbolic leadership from these influential decision-makers. Boards cannot only show leadership; they must lead.

Boards influence how institutions respond to external and internal pressures to meet increasing demands and expectations (Kerr & Gade, 1989). Recent scandals illustrate how public trust in higher education could be derailed if university officials do not correctly address crises. However, not all public trust is lost in higher education considering university scandals; the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19 provide colleges and universities an opportunity to re-establish their commitment to the general public and heighten institutional accountability. Institutional leaders must be attentive to risks and demonstrate leadership through their actions (AGB, 2014). By assessing their role in governance, boards can (re)position themselves as key institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) in dealing with university challenges and leading the way to re-establishing trust in institutions of higher education. The focus on the governing boards' role is essential because regardless of "...the delegation of authority to the administration and faculty...the board still retains the ultimate responsibility" for what happens on campus (AGB, 1998, p. 3).

Higher education is a crisis-prone enterprise; the current crises force higher education leaders to address the present challenges and those preexisting crises that higher education has yet to address (MacTaggart, 2020). Changes in the higher education environment unearth new questions regarding the form and function of shared governance (Morphew, 1999). Accordingly, it is crucial that campus leaders critically reflect on how their decisions are made and consider the potential impact of the decisions (Eckel & Kezar, 2006). To survive, institutions must be responsive to their environments (Birnbaum, 1988). The board must be multifaceted to be reactive, proactive, and adaptive all at the same time. The mixed responses to COVID-19 and racial injustice are not new. Scholarship has demonstrated that quick and dramatic changes in higher education can prompt haphazard adaptation on behalf of faculty and administration (Morphew, 1999). Recent events in higher education related to the pandemic warrant a much needed (re)introduction to the board to show the advantageous possibilities. As a starting point for this (re)introduction, boards may want to (re)establish themselves as the standard of higher education answerability by plainly asserting their positions in a timely fashion when institutions face crises.

While institutions and their leaders often do not have control over what happens with a pandemic such as COVID-19, they do have control over how they respond, how quickly they respond, and how they move to align their words with actions for DEI related issues. If the examples mentioned above have taught us anything, it is that inaction, indecision, and delay have proven to be problematic. Examples exist to demonstrate that higher education can do better. It is no longer permissible to settle for doing things right; our leaders must do the right thing at the right time. For this change to occur, boards, in particular, need to take stock of their role in identifying and addressing challenges. The board specifically must enter DEI related conversations. Their past absence in such matters may lead individuals to assume that they do not have a role to play in this necessary work. However, boards of trustees do matter for DEI initiatives and progress. Higher education stakeholders should expect that boards will help lead and navigate their institutions through the current (and future) crises. So how do boards leverage their expertise? To what extent, if at all, can universities use their experiences in dealing with university pandemics to heighten accountability and re-establish public trust in higher education?

Through culturally sustaining governance, board members make central decisions on behalf of higher education institutions simultaneously as they focus on what is equitable (Rall et al., 2020). As seen in Table 1, there are five roles that boards can assume in equity-centered decision making. At any given time, boards can fluctuate from serving in one or all of these capacities. However, in the new COVID-19 environment, boards have had to move from the bottom of the table to the top to take a

more hands-on role. Boards must purposefully guide the institution in alignment with the campus mission. Via the lens of COVID-19, however, the impact of board action carries implications for marginalized populations. Ideally, boards will embody the “initiator” role more than they have in the past; they will be able to respond to COVID-19 and maintain a focus on equity to not further marginalize these groups. An emphasis on “both/and” not “either/or” is key; the demand for maximizing institutional decisions and the demand that equity is prioritized are not mutually exclusive, and one need not adversely impact the other (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Equity-mindedness requires boards to be deliberate in their decision-making to avoid the risk of increasing inequity (Bensimon, 2018).

Table 1. 5 Roles Boards Assume in the Pursuit of Equity

Role	Description
Initiator	Boards spearhead a policy, practice, or procedure to maximize equity on campus
Catalyzer	Boards follow the impetus of others (e.g., community groups or campus staff) to improve equitable outcomes
Bystander	Boards fail to get involved in the movement towards equity and continue “business as usual”; boards neither <i>intentionally</i> advance nor impede critical equity work
Inhibitor	Boards slow, divert, or problematize the need for initiatives rooted in equity
Barrier	Boards directly create a policy, practice, or procedure that challenges the advancement of equity

*Adapted from Rall et al., 2020

An Example of Equity-Minded Leadership amid Crisis

The California State University System (CSU), the nation’s largest four-year public university system in the United States (Celly & Knepper, 2010), is also known for having one of the most diverse student bodies in the country. The CSU was the first institution to announce it would keep its campus closed in the fall of 2020 in an effort to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It was later determined that the CSU would remain virtual for the entire 2020-2021 academic year. While many thought the decision was too rash, the CSU did not shy away from leading academia in a time when uncertainty was the norm. Across the 23 institutions in the system, campuses worked to abate the spread of COVID-19 while not sacrificing the caliber of access and education for its most vulnerable student population, including a population with nearly half Pell-eligible students. The CSU invested millions in offering current students digital services and equipment, including free Wi-Fi, software, devices, and provided emergency grants via the CSU Cares Program. For prospective students, the institution extended the deadline for undergraduate applications. It temporarily suspended the use of ACT/SAT tests in determining admission eligibility for all CSU campuses for the next academic year.

The CSU system released A Statement of Inclusion on March 12, 2020:

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are foundational values for the California State University, and every member of the CSU community is encouraged to exemplify those values. This is especially true as incidents of bias and xenophobia have

increased during the Coronavirus outbreak. Any such actions or attitudes, ranging from microaggressions to overt harassment, have no place within the California State University; students, staff and faculty are actively encouraged to reject and denounce xenophobia and bigotry, and to treat all with dignity and respect.

The system, led by Chancellor White, declared early on that DEI would remain the focus of its operations even while all eyes across the nation had determined COVID-19 was the focal challenge of the day. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the CSU evinced this focus on equity when, on September 2020, it named Joseph I. Castro, the “first native Californian, first Mexican-American and first CSU president promoted to the position” as the CSU’s eighth chancellor (Smith, 2020). The CSU board of trustees executed this decision—a selection that was not only equity-minded but also catapulted the board as an “initiator,” bringing about demonstrative and symbolic change to long-held norms and traditions of how university leadership looks. The CSU further identified as a “catalyzer” of ongoing DEI initiatives when Castro committed to addressing disparities in graduation rates during his leadership via The Graduation Initiative 2025. Impacts of the CSU efforts manifest in surges in enrollment numbers and a record 85.5% retention where first-time students continued to their second year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020).

The tone at the top matters; now, more than ever before, institutional leaders must be attentive to risks and demonstrate leadership through their actions (AGB, 2014). Some boards utilize an understanding, recognition, or prioritization of equity in their decision-making (Rall et al., 2020). However, institutions across the nation can do much better with making sure that diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice are understood and valued at the highest levels in academe; the board is fundamental in this effort. 2020 ought to serve as a reminder that governing boards are tasked with guiding and overseeing change while simultaneously assessing and meeting the needs for action and deliberation to best accommodate the complexities of higher education governance (Hill et al., 2001). The board has yet to establish what role it can, should, or needs to play in precarious situations such as these. In asserting its position and role in these critical times, boards can hold other higher education stakeholders accountable by leading by example. Today’s higher education climate necessitates that boards do more and ultimately be more than they have in the past.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities cannot return to the former status quo; institutional leaders must prepare for an uncertain future. An integral component of that preparation is action. In recent history, the public has found itself outside of the knowledge of what trustees do both regularly and in serious moments of conflict. Relatively recent events in higher education can serve as an inflection point for the boards’ role in governance and leadership going forward. The enhanced clarity around the board can also call us to hold the entire institution of higher education to advanced standards of accountability. It is important to note that presently, inactivity or slow activity makes a clear statement that reverberates throughout higher education. In other words, by not publicly acknowledging or addressing pressing issues facing higher education, boards can be considered to have chosen to make a statement through their inaction. Silence is often just as powerful a declaration as any verbal or written stance. Boards need to make active, clear, and consistent responses to major issues facing colleges and universities that no one wants to talk about and deal with not just because they can, but because they should, and because no one else is stepping up to fill the void. Boards need to lead the way. And while boards have traditionally operated in the realm of behind-the-scenes control, moving into the forefront now can allow boards to lay the foundation and lead the charge for accountability in higher education. The

public is listening, watching, and anticipating who will lead higher education during this critical time. The board stands in the right position at this critical juncture to (re)establish institutional, ethical, and educational priorities. And while the meaning behind such an assertion of identity is grand, the first step is unassuming; it all can start with a basic (re)introduction to the role of the board in demonstrating that equity should be normalized, prioritized, institutionalized, and valued whether the institution is in a pandemic or not.

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