



STRATEGIC & INCLUSIVE BOARDS

A Board Member's Explainer

What is a Strategic and Inclusive Board?

A strategic and inclusive board ensures that institutions effectively serve a broad range of stakeholders by including a broad range of perspectives, backgrounds, and lived experiences among its members, leading to more well-rounded discussions and better-informed decisions.

Strategic and inclusive boards are multi-dimensional and include:

- **Demographic Diversity –**

- Representation across gender, race, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers to reflect stakeholders.



- **Professional Diversity –**

- A mix of members, skills, and knowledge from various fields and areas such as education, healthcare, policy, finance, technology, and community to bring interdisciplinary insights.



- **Experiential Diversity –**

- Individuals with varied life experiences such as educational backgrounds, differently abled experiences, diverse financial landscapes, military service, varied geographic experiences, and those from different political or ideological backgrounds.



7 Reasons Boards Should Care About Strategic and Inclusive Representation:

1

Improved Decision-Making.

- A strategic and inclusive board brings intersectional perspectives and lived experiences, leading to more well-rounded discussions and better-informed decisions.
- Research shows that group diversity leads to higher-quality problem-solving by reducing groupthink and encouraging critical debate.

2

Better Representation of Campus Communities.

- Boards represent the interests of highly diverse stakeholders, yet their composition has historically remained unchanged since their inception. The composition of higher education has changed considerably over the years but board composition still models boards of the past.
- Students, faculty, and staff come from varied racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. A diverse board ensures their voices and concerns can be sought, understood, anticipated, and addressed.
- Representation from different disciplinary, institutional, and professional backgrounds helps create policies that reflect the needs of various learners, and can improve the education and support for a diverse workforce.

3

Enhanced Public Trust.

- Universities serve diverse communities, and boards that reflect this diversity in their decision-making increase trust and legitimacy among students, faculty, and the public.
- Institutions with inclusive leadership are often better positioned to secure funding from donors that prioritize myriad backgrounds.



7 Reasons Boards Should Care About Strategic and Inclusive Representation:

4

Stronger Commitment to Mission-Centric Work.

- A strategic and inclusive board is more likely to make sure policies that support underrepresented groups, including initiatives for faculty diversity, student access, and inclusive curricula that align with the institutional mission and commitments.
- A strategic and inclusive board signals institutional commitment to equity, which can improve recruitment and retention of campus leadership that embody institutional values.

5

Proactive Responsiveness and Adaptability.

- As higher education adapts to globalization, technological advancements, and shifting demographics, a diverse board brings a range of expertise and adaptability to address new challenges.
- Strategic and inclusive leadership ensures institutions prepare students for an evolving workforce that values inclusivity, cultural competence, and varied perspectives.

6

Higher Financial and Organizational Performance.

- Corporate and nonprofit governance studies indicate that diverse leadership teams lead to better financial and operational outcomes.
- Higher education institutions benefit similarly, with more effective resource allocation, policy development, and strategic planning when diverse voices are involved.

7

Innovation in Policy and Practice.

- Strategically inclusive boards foster environments where new ideas are encouraged rather than suppressed.
- When governance includes individuals with varied lived experiences, academic backgrounds, and ways of thinking, institutions benefit from creative approaches to persistent challenges, such as student success initiatives, affordability, recruitment, and campus safety.
- This diversity of thought can lead to more innovative academic programs, modernized support services, and policies that respond to emerging needs. In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, boards that embrace innovative thinking are far better positioned to help institutions remain relevant, competitive, and mission-

Seven Obstacles That May Be Hindering Your Goals of a Strategic and Inclusive Board

1. Mirroring the Wrong Population and Anticipating the Wrong Needs

- Is your board appointing members who reflect the current demographics of the board or of the campus? When you think about your stakeholders, who do you represent as a board?
- Which of those voices are currently not being represented in the boardroom? Is your board anticipating the needs of the workforce the institution represents?



2. No Term Limits

- Multiple re-appointments or 12-year appointments with no removal processes will create very slow demographic changes.

3. Unclear Recruitment/Appointment Process

- How are board members recruited to join your board, or who is in charge of the recruitment process? Do you have transparent recruitment/appointment practices, or are these positions exclusive to networks? Is the process straightforward for both the board and potential new members? Are there certain individuals who are more likely to apply based on the current approach, and if so, how can that change to reach a wider audience? Are you actively looking for ways to expand your recruitment pools? (examples of networks or areas that boards can draw qualified candidates from)
- Strategic and inclusive boards extend the opportunity to as wide a range of candidates as possible, ensuring that you can find the most qualified individuals to serve.

4. Ambiguous Membership Qualifications

- What do your current bylaws say about membership qualifications to join the board? What makes a board member “qualified”? Is this well-defined in your bylaws or application? (See Rall et al., 2021)? What qualifications is your board looking for in its members, and does everyone in charge of recruitment agree on them?
 - Is it someone who understands the university? Who understands higher education? Who values the mission of the university? Who can make monetary contributions? Etc.
 - Defining the culture and values of your board is essential, and so is making sure that your qualifications reflect those values.

5. "Pay to Play"

- Are you considering fixed donation requirements for board members, or does your board consider these practices on a case-by-case basis? Are you having strategic conversations with your members about monetary contributions?
- Do you exclude highly qualified members based solely on monetary contributions? Are there other ways for board members to raise funds, or do they have to be an out-of-pocket donation? Are you assuming certain groups cannot "pay-to-play" or are these conversations that you are having with candidates?

6. Accessibility

- Are board meetings accessible? i.e. Are the hours inclusive of working professionals/caretakers? Do meetings have hybrid options, or do they require extensive travel? Are there accommodations available?

7. Lack of or insufficient board training

- If boards do not receive ongoing professional learning, they may default to outdated governance practices that limit strategic thinking and inclusive leadership.
- Do new members receive onboarding that explains mission, demographics, governance and responsibilities? Are members offered continued training on emerging issues such as demographic shifts, legal updates, campus climate trends, or best practices?
- Without structured development, even well-intentioned members may lack the tools to identify inequities, avoid unintentional exclusion, or contribute effectively to long-term strategy.



1

Context Matters.

- Strategic and inclusive board compositions will vary by institution type and needs. Boards should use institutional data to interpret stakeholder demographics and campus environments and identify which voices are not represented in the boardroom. Additionally, boards should discuss institutional priorities and whether their member composition is equipped to support their mission-centric work, or if there are expertise and knowledge gaps that need to be addressed.

2

Diversity And Qualifications Are Not Mutually Exclusive.

- There are many diverse, highly-qualified individuals who would be significant assets to boards. It is often the result of exclusionary cultures and practices, closed networks, and biases, that hinder board diversity (see Dominguez, 2023). By expanding the recruitment pool, boards can ensure that the best candidates, regardless of background, are considered.

3

You Can Build Strategic and Inclusive Boards without Explicitly Asking About Demographics

- Here is where your board bylaws become essential. Do the board bylaws include language about valuable candidates with extensive histories of supporting or championing mission-centric work that aligns with your institutional mission? How much weight does this have in the appointment process? (i.e., how important this is to your board). For boards who cannot explicitly talk about DEI, you do not need to ask about DEI or mention DEI in an interview—let the candidate's background speak for itself. Perhaps re-think about the materials your board asks for when screening applications.

4

Representation ≠ Inclusion.

- As you look to diversify your board, consider whether the board's culture fosters an inclusive space where diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and lived experiences are welcomed and encouraged.

5

Avoid Tokenism.

- Having diverse members does not mean having diversity experts. It is not the responsibility of members with specific identity markers to be experts on issues related to their identities. As equity discussions come before the board, boards must refrain from charging individuals, or groups, with the responsibility of addressing such concerns.

Seven Points To Consider As You Assemble a Strategic and Inclusive Board:

6

There is No Magic Number.

- Questions to think about... Is your board appointing members to "meet quotas"? Or because you value the contributions of diverse individuals to the board? There is no "magical number" when it comes to diversity.
- Are you considering intersectional identities? e.g., Women of Color
- Boards should not aim to meet quotas within any category but rather focus on the multi-faceted, intersectional experiences that members can contribute to the group.

7

Do not stop at the board level.

- Consider these same tips at the board committee level. Are diverse perspectives represented on all committees, especially some of the more influential committees like governance and finance?

They Say – You Say:

How Board Members Can Respond To Stakeholders

THEY
SAY

YOU
SAY

“ —

They Say: "Strategic and inclusive boards are boards that are explicitly looking to advance DEI. This practice is unlawful in our state."

You Say: "Strategic and inclusive boards do their utmost diligence in recruiting the most qualified members for the institution while also strategizing to address the knowledge and expertise gaps on the board. Our process includes expanding recruitment pools so that we can have a broad range of applicants and screening for applicants that best align with our mission-centric goals, regardless of their backgrounds. We look for a broad range of qualifications and life experiences that, in combination, help us build a board that can effectively and proactively meet the needs and values of our wide range of stakeholders. This approach keeps us from being self-replicating and allows new expertise and perspectives to be added to the boardroom and strengthen our governance."



They Say: "Are we being forced to include people based on identity rather than expertise?"



You Say: "No. Board selection remains focused on expertise, leadership, and alignment with institutional goals. Diversity in identity is a byproduct of intentional outreach, but the primary focus is on securing the best candidates to serve effectively and carry on the responsibilities of mission-centric work. To be honest, research tells us that board appointment is highly political and not based on qualifications at all."

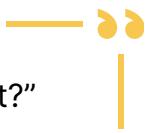


They Say: "Is focusing on inclusive boards a distraction from our core roles and responsibilities?"

You Say: "A strategic and inclusive board enhances core priorities by ensuring that members can speak to policies and institutional strategies through a well-informed lens that is relevant to the communities they serve."



They Say: "Are we implementing diversity initiatives just to be politically correct?"



You Say: "No. A strategic and inclusive board is about governance excellence, not political correctness. Inclusion means making space for a variety of perspectives, including those who are skeptical of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The goal is to foster thoughtful, evidence-based discussions that reflect the realities and needs of the institution. Institutions that embrace a wide range of perspectives make better decisions, build public trust, and are better positioned for long-term success."

Resources:

- Dominguez, V. G. (2023). Counter-stories of Women of Color navigating the trusteeship: A critical race feminism analysis of the organizational culture of higher education boards in the U.S. UC Riverside. ProQuest ID: Dominguez_ucr_0032D_15464. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m57473q7. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5tk6r3db>
- [Research - WNLI.org](https://wnli.org/research/)
- Rall, R. M., Dominguez, V., & Garcia, A. (2022). What does it take to lead: The hidden curriculum of qualifications for service on public boards of higher education. *Teachers College Record*, 124(1), 191-226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221086116>