Diversity of Community College Trustees: Expanding Opportunities

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Introduction

There is a considerable amount of scholarship and research generated about the position of African Americans in higher education, specifically full-time faculty and those who have ascended into executive leadership positions. Yet, there is little research on the underrepresentation of African American community college trustees, nor their experiences at predominantly White institutions. For example, most studies concerning African Americans have focused on the retention of students or faculty (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). Furthermore, previous research suggests that increasing the number of faculty members and administrators of color may contribute to the "critical mass" needed to have a positive effect on educational quality and student achievement (Fujimoto, 2012). Including African Americans on institutional boards in this research is critical because trustees are uniquely positioned to advance transformational change in ways that others cannot, as they can raise representation issues and place these discussions on the public board agenda, they can create public discussion and debate concerning the diversity issues, and they are positioned to hold the institution and leadership accountable for progress. In a perfect world, a governing board and leadership of the institution would ethnically and racially mirror their student population (Higgs, 2014). Research has shown an obvious and ongoing underrepresentation of minority community college trustees (Moltz, 2009).

Furthermore, research shows little to no progress in hiring African American administrators at predominantly White institutions of higher education (Levin et al. 2013; Levin et al., 2014). The 2018 Citizen Trustee Survey revealed gender and racial gaps among community college boards of trustees in the United States (Association of Community College Trustees [ACCT], 2018). This study was the catalyst for the researchers to explore the pathways followed by African American trustees in American community colleges.

As a result of an open-door admissions policy, community colleges have become the institution of choice for many students pursuing higher education and a better standard of living. Community colleges provide affordable educational opportunities to many students of various ages, backgrounds, experiences, and cultures. According to the Community College Research Center (CCRC, 2019), as of the fall of 2017, 5.8 million students were enrolled in community colleges. Community colleges in the United States admit 41% of all undergraduates in higher education (American Association of Community College [AACC], 2018) representing a majority of undergraduate students of color who are enrolled at colleges and universities today, with 56% of Native Americans, 52% of Hispanics, 43% of African Americans, and 40% of Asian/Pacific Islanders (AACC, 2018). Although the AACC and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) annually report a constant growth in racial/ethnic minority student enrollment in community colleges, research shows that community colleges lag four-year colleges and universities in the diversification of their faculty and administrator ranks. Community colleges

are not attaining the same level of diversity among faculty and administrators that exists among their student populations (Rifkin, 2008; Robinson et al., 2013).

Research reveals that the success potential of most community colleges and their students rests within leaders' efforts to provide diverse role models for their changing student demographics. For instance, African American students at community colleges perform better academically when they have African American faculty with whom they can relate (Fujimoto, 2012; Laden & Hagedorn, 2000; Sadao, 2003).

Additionally, there is a lack of research on local community college governing boards. As a result, there is no baseline to understand what influences trustees to serve their local community college nor the policy impact on student success. Because community colleges are the primary provider of postsecondary education to low-income and minority students, it is important to understand who is governing these institutions and what influence that may have on the board's decisions. If community college governing board members do not reflect the demographic of the constituencies they serve, this could have significant policy implications that adversely impact the progress of students from underrepresented groups.

To address this omission in the literature, we designed a study to develop a basic understanding of the lived experiences of African American trustee members within community colleges, their influence on the college's diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies, and the effect that these trustees can have on the hiring of a diverse faculty, leadership teams, and eventually upon student success. In addition, this study was designed to contribute to filling a void in the scholarship of the boards of trustees at public community colleges (Espinosa et al., 2019; Gagliardi et al., 2017; NCES, 2019; Selingo et al., 2017). We hoped that if we found disparities on the community college boards of trustees, then a meaningfully serious dialogue could be developed that examined culturally systemic barriers in higher education and could be used to guide practitioners in developing minority candidates to prepare, develop proficiencies, and persist to become trustees (ACCT, 2018).

Methodology

The researchers identified 10 community colleges that had been recognized by the ACCT as National Equity Award winners from the years 2010-2020. From those national award winners, ten African American trustees were identified and asked a series of interview questions on their lived experiences. The questions dug deep into the pathway the trustees followed, who advised or mentored them along their path, and what factors they saw as positively influencing their work and success as trustees. These African American trustees served in colleges in Northeast, South, West, and Midwest states and were in colleges that were defined as large, medium, and small. The colleges were in both urban and suburban communities. Our research questions were:
1. What were the lived experiences of African American community college trustees in their role as trustees?
2. What impediments, barriers, or prejudices/biases have these African American community college trustees observed that affect and impede the deeper diversification of college faculty, staff, and leadership?

3. What best practices might other college trustees and CEOs undertake to influence a more diverse and inclusive environment, resulting in a more diverse college environment?

Findings

The colleges researched in the study are leading the way, sharing the models, and showing that embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion is not a weakness but a strength of their college and community. These award-winning colleges and leadership teams do this by: fostering a college climate of equity, civility, and inclusion that is welcoming to all; providing an ongoing forum for uncomfortable conversations through the talents and resources already in place; supporting and expanding professional development efforts of offices and initiatives; reviewing academic and administrative policies to eliminate and/or revise those that no longer fit the needs of the college's diverse student, faculty, and staff demographics; and, facing head-on the data that shows deficiencies gaps among minority students. The institutions, trustees, and presidents who lead them realize that diverse colleges are more productive and are effective in recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining talented people.

Political Environment and the Selection Process. To better understand the process followed for the trustees who were in politically appointed roles, those appointed trustees were questioned on the process followed to place them on the Board of Trustees. These trustees reported that their appointment, while political in nature (e.g., screening and eventual appointment by either a governor, county official, or other politically elected individual), was not impacted by the political party affiliation. Analysis revealed that political affiliation was irrelevant. Among the seven appointed trustees interviewed for the study, only one of the seven was appointed by a governor who was of the same party affiliation as the newly appointed trustee. In this single case, the trustee and the governor were Democrats. Interestingly, with the remaining six appointed trustees, each was appointed by a Republican governor, and all these trustees were Democrats. While there has been significant debate across the nation about the highly politicized nature of political appointments, this study did not find that the current state of the politicized environment has impacted the process used to appoint community college trustees in these ACCT award-winning colleges.

Still, all participants stated that the political environment determined the selection process regardless of the method of selection. This sentiment existed even though seven out of the eight participants who were appointed were selected by a governor or school board whose political affiliation was different from theirs. Though they were selected by someone of a different party, one singular appointment was not adequate to change the overall diversity makeup of the board and those who were in the majority—predominantly White trustees—concerning overall representation did not change. The researcher observed that Republican entities appointing Democrats gave the appearance of advancing equality while still maintaining control or power.

Having an Advocate or Mentor is Critical. Trustees reported that the presence of a mentor in their personal and professional life was highly impactful and critical to the participants' successful selection as a trustee. For some participants, it was a political figure who served as a mentor; for others, it was a local business professional or friend/colleague on the board. Regardless of the mentor's profession or connection, participants stressed the importance of

someone coaching, advising, and networking on their behalf. It was this coaching that helped the trustee gain the necessary experience, confidence, and local community visibility that eventually led to them being considered for the trustee role. The mentor helped guide the individual and was at their side when needed to advise them and position them for their future success.

Service Experience was Essential. The majority of trustees interviewed also revealed that having community or public service experience was critically important. The researchers were told that developing public service skills and a reputation for serving others got the trustees noticed and positioned them within the community for their eventual appointment as trustees. Through this public service agenda, the trustee "got on the radar" of someone of influence who would advocate on their behalf when a trustee role became available, and also often served as a mentor for the trustee once they were on the Board. Additionally, most of the participants felt that they became better known and recognized in the community as effective and experienced public servants. They agreed this was a critical component when each was considered for the trusteeship as a result of their visibility in the volunteer role.

Racism's Roles. One interesting discovery was that when asked, none of the participants professed to have experienced any direct form of racism during the time that they served on the community college board from fellow trustees, the college leadership team, or within the college in general. Racism was reported, however, as being implicit. Several of the participants who were appointed found that the perception of many in the college or community was that having a single minority representative on the board was acceptable because their influence would be minimal. These trustees felt many considered their inability to get a majority vote from their fellow trustees to change policy on diversity efforts made their appointment and eventual work less threatening.

Similarly, the process of being appointed or elected often had flaws or roadblocks. For the trustees who were appointed, the research determined that before being appointed one had to know the process or know someone who understood and was experienced with the process. These African-American trustees believed that gathering advice from someone who understood the process was a challenge in itself because the majority of board members, even at these award-winning colleges, tended to be older, White males, and the trustees did not believe that they would actively support their candidacy. Elected processes had similar barriers. A successful candidate had to identify when and where to file candidacy papers and had to possess or raise the funds for a successful campaign. Many minority candidates did not know how to manage a campaign, and many of these processes have historically been closed to African Americans and other minorities.

Another finding was how trustees defined the barriers and impediments found within the process. While the male participants directly defined the barriers and impediments as racism, the female participants were reluctant to refer to the obstacles or situations as racism, instead referring to the phenomenon as conservatism or status quo.

Diversity is a Strength. Research revealed that all but one of these award-winning colleges had a DE&I (diversity, equity, and inclusion) mandate. Although each of the colleges had a DE&I strategic plan, one study participant stated that they were unclear about how it was being

implemented, and that they had never seen established goals or key performance indicators as existed with other college strategic initiatives. Nevertheless, it was observed that each of the colleges was on the cutting edge of making DE&I inroads and had DE&I values intertwined within the college culture. This was a normal course of business for these institutions. The idea that equity was a strength of the college—and not a weakness—was a consistent message heard during the interviews. Developing this mindset of diversity and equity as a strength permeated the award-winning institutions and was seen by college leadership and the trustees as being mission-critical for their institution and the community. This mindset influenced their work, the college agenda, and the institution.

Lack of Exposure and Accountability. Study participants believed the underrepresentation of African Americans and other minorities on their boards of trustees was a result of a lack of exposure by future potential trustees within the community. Trustees observed that the lack of exposure stemmed from a lack of accountability in the community in supporting persons of color to gain the necessary community experience that would prepare them for a role as Trustee. They believed that with proper accountability, exposure and engagement within the appointment/election process would be systemic rather than left to chance. Accountability would ensure that all individuals within a community would have equal access, understanding, and exposure. Without such accountability, the trustees felt that efforts to diversify trustees, college leadership, faculty recruitment and hiring, and ultimately, student success, would lack intentionality and structure. The trustees reported that everyone needed to be intentional and active in terms of these efforts for equity to be achieved. The trustees reported that failing to find future African American trustees to serve was more likely a result of candidates' lack of exposure within the community and to the processes that would prepare them for success.

Willingness and the Time to Serve the Community. An eager willingness to serve the college and community was clearly a theme of the study results. Several participants believed one of the reasons for African Americans not being on the boards of trustees was their unwillingness to serve. This willingness (or perhaps the unwillingness) to serve was not a simple question of being open and making themselves available to do community/volunteer work. The challenge was much deeper and had to do with time and cost, especially for those who live in impoverished communities. In the final analysis, it came down to whether one was open and willing to commit the time and resources that allowed them to serve. Though most of the individuals interviewed were not impoverished economically, they still had limited time due to professional and family demands. Time was found to be the rarest of commodities, and those interviewed described that their commitment must be to use their time to the greatest benefit, and to reap the most benefit. This was especially true for those who were early in their career and/or had young families.

Valuing Differences. No trustees reported race and racism being experienced in their role; they did, however, see that racism affected and impeded deeper diversification of the college. A majority of the participants were not convinced that their presence on the board was fully appreciated. Additionally, they believed that valuing those who are not like you was not something that can be forced on individuals or institutions and must become part of the culture of the college, if there is a plan to achieve true equity and inclusion. As one participant reported, his college had broadened the definition of diversity to include opinion. Also, we noted that a

commonality among all the study participants was that it did not matter how one referred to the issue of underrepresentation of trustees, leaders, and faculty—be it as racism, conservatism, the good old boy system, the old guard, or simply as needlessness—the institutional system (or process) was seen as protecting the past institutional system and traditions.

Equity Advocate – Diversity and Inclusion is Everyone's Job. All the participants believed that equity meant equal access to all, not merely based on race and gender, but also included disability, orientation, family, employment, transportation, food, etc. Furthermore, the researchers observed that one participant was dogmatic about diversity and inclusion being everyone's job. Similarly, the researchers observed that the colleges that were the recipient of the ACCT Equity Award incorporated DE&I in all that they do.

Restorative Justice. One trustee's college practiced restorative justice and recognized and acknowledged that racism permeated across and within communities, industries, and organizations, including their college. To them, restorative justice meant that all (trustees, executives, faculty, students) were responsible for addressing and confronting racism, particularly in the ways decisions are made, the guidance provided, and the policies and practices they support and engage in throughout the fabric of the college.

This trustee stated that his college went beyond simply instituting a DE&I plan. He stated his college had gone beyond merely trying to correct a wrong, but to understanding the wrong and how best to amend the injustices that African Americans and other people of color had experienced. This participant also stated that his college was very serious about diversity, equity, and inclusion and that the State now had a mandate that DE&I would permeate into all State colleges and universities. The trustee believed that if it was a high priority of the State government then it would perhaps be easier to implement for local community colleges.

Implications for Practice

The study identified several inadequacies that impacted the underrepresentation of African Americans on boards of trustees and their subsequent influence on diversity, equity, and inclusion at community colleges. Based on the data gathered from this group of trustees, ten recommendations to improve practice are presented here to consider as a roadmap for developing a more diverse, equity-oriented college. If implemented, these recommendations could prepare the college to recruit, interview, and place more trustees, leaders, and faculty of color. The recommendations for practice for this study are:

1. Broaden the definition of diversity to include diversity of opinions. Expanding the definition of diversity will foster a college climate of open discussion, equity, civility, and inclusion that is welcoming to all.

2. Potential trustee candidates should intentionally work to gain meaningful experience and community awareness before attempting to undertake a college trustee role. This experience may be developed by volunteering or serving on community boards such as the local YMCA/YWCA, the local branch of the Urban League and NAACP, Salvation Army, Girls & Boys Club of America, foundations, or faith-based organizations.

3. Findings from this study indicate that although the number of African American trustees has increased from an historical standpoint, racism is still alive and active. Because implicit racism was still prevalent among these trustees, professional development for trustees concerning DE&I should be considered. Some interviewees had participated in professional development at ACCT, and they felt more effective as a result of the sessions. Trustees should encourage fellow members of their college trustees and trustees from other colleges to serve on the Diversity Equity committee and support and expand PD efforts of offices and initiatives across the college. Recognizing that trustee professional development is critical to the future of the field, it is recommended that nationally recognized community college leadership programs work with the ACCT Board and Diversity Committee to design and implement a national trustee training and development program. The program would have a focus on the diversification of American community college trustees and could become a resource to community college trustees nationwide. The program would also support the development of equity and inclusion policy and practice development and would support the diversification of the trustee members at colleges nationally and the diversification of faculty and executives hired at American community colleges

4. Equity is everyone's job. Trustees should intentionally place measurable expectations and hold college leadership teams accountable for broadening hiring/recruitment practices and conduct celebrations of diversity advocates and champions on the campus and in the community.

5. The prototype of a community college trustee being a White male (or female) presents an impediment to assuring that African American trustees, leadership, faculty, and staff of color reflect that of their student population. The findings from this research documented that mentors or coaches were very important for these trustees. As well as understanding the process and being exposed to becoming a community college trustee. Community college leaders could broaden the understanding of serving as a board trustee by providing community development and inviting people of color to learn about the role of trustee.

6. Community college leaders need to bring awareness to the issue of equity and diversity on the boards of trustees: informing them about organizational climates and cultures that eliminate structural and institutional barriers that may inhibit diverse boards of trustees; providing a framework to inform the boards of trustees and governors of the selection and recruitment practices that may lead to an increase in representation of minorities on the boards of trustees; informing future, current, and former trustees of practices, necessary training, selections, and recruiting of trustees; and, providing a recommendation on the process and steps a Board of Trustees might undertake to implement an equitable and inclusive environment for faculty, students, and administrators.

Conclusion

American community colleges, and those who lead these colleges, are working hard every day to improve how we serve students, yet there is much work to do to ensure that every student has a quality experience and that the faculty, staff, and leaders with whom students interact with every

day reflect our student demographics with their diverse backgrounds. It is imperative that trustees and college leaders actively support, recruit, and mentor potential trustees of color, and that professional community college trustee organizations develop a deeper focus on this work. Additionally, community college leadership programs have a role to play in the development of future trustees and how we might prepare them to be successful.

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