



Why Boards of Cultural Organizations Need to Diversify – and How to Do It

Patricia A. Banks, Mount Holyoke College

Cultural organizations like museums, dance companies, and theaters promote art and culture from their communities and within their communities. Their programs serve many important public purposes. They provide access to the visual and performing arts for people outside artistic circles, they inspire new generations of artists and cultural critics, and they often shape public discussions about societal values and beliefs. Questions about who runs and benefits from these cultural organizations are as important as the organizations themselves.

Although the boards of cultural organizations have become more diverse in the last several decades, racial and ethnic minorities remain underrepresented. Close to half (46%) of museum boards in the United States include only whites. In New York City racial and ethnic minorities make up a majority of the population, but whites comprise close to 75% of the city's cultural trustees. For both substantive and symbolic reasons, boards of cultural institutions need to become more ethnically and racially diverse.

The Importance of Board Diversity

Because people's experiences and identities vary in part by race and ethnicity, individual board members of different racial and ethnic groups bring varied perspectives to an institution. A study on opera house and museum boards finds that some racial and ethnic minority trustees link their identity explicitly to their approach to governance. For example, a Latinx trustee shared in an interview that ethnicity helps shape his thinking about his board role; his ethnicity can help him understand what makes his institution appealing to other Latinx people.

Similarly, in my own research on African American museums, I find that relative to white patrons, black supporters are especially concerned with black issues, including whether or not African Americans are on the staff at the institution. I also find that first and second-generation West Indian and African donors, trustees, and others involved in philanthropy are especially attentive to how museums serve black immigrant communities.

Diversifying the boards of cultural institutions matters symbolically as well. People from minority backgrounds may be reluctant to visit cultural institutions that lack diverse leadership. Projections suggest that racial and ethnic minorities may comprise over half of the population in the United States by 2045. Therefore, attracting patrons from current racial and ethnic minorities will become increasingly important for cultural institutions. All-white facial homogeneity may undermine the legitimacy of cultural organizations. Public service is central to the missions of many cultural organizations, which are often subsidized with public funds.

How to Diversify the Boards of Cultural Institutions

Cultural institutions that have already added minority members to their boards offer insights on how best to do this.

Ethnic cultural institutions have high proportions of racial and ethnic minority board members. My in-depth interviews with black supporters of African American museums shows that such institutions appeal to them because they focus on African American culture and have high shares of black staff, audiences, and patrons. This suggests that other institutions may also become more attractive to potential minority trustees by demonstrating a commitment to diversity across multiple areas of institutional operations and programming.

Cultural organizations are not solely responsible for the diversity of their boards – or lack thereof.

Professional associations, governmental bodies, and foundations should also support diversification. Professional associations can help shift values. For example, in a 2015 keynote address to the Association of Art Museum Directors, then-President Johnetta Cole made the case that diversifying museums, including boards, was fundamental to their core mission. Government and foundations can encourage board diversity by linking it to funding. For example, organizations applying for Cultural Development Fund grants from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs are required to describe their efforts to create a diverse board.

Foundations can use direct grants to support board diversity or fund research on the topic. For example, in January 2019, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Alice L. Walton Foundation, and Ford Foundation joined together to fund \$4,000,000 in grants to support efforts by the American Alliance of Museums to increase board diversity among its member institutions. Similarly, in 2015 the Ford Foundation helped to fund a study on diversity at cultural institutions in New York City. This study shed light on the racial and ethnic makeup of boards and the findings were used to help develop a new cultural plan for the city that included efforts to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in cultural institutions.

Attracting more racial and ethnic minorities to serve on boards will require that cultural institutions further diversity in all their activities. Institutions should not act alone. Steps taken together by a wide range of cultural organizations, non-profits, and government agencies can help to shift the needle on board diversity and ensure that cultural institutions serve their public missions.

Read more in Patricia A. Banks *Diversity and Philanthropy at African American Museums* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).