

research snapshot

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Not-for-Profit Boards Need to Be More Diverse

What is this research about?

Diversity refers to those characteristics that make people different from one another, such as age, race, and gender, among others. Over the past two decades, diversity has become a hot topic in Canada. One cause of this is the make-up of the population, which has grown more diverse over time. (In 2001, 28% of Canadians were found to have been born outside the country – a 70-year high.) But is this growing diversity being reflected at all levels of society? For example, how diverse are the boards in not-for-profit organizations?

What did the researcher do?

Researchers at York University set out to assess the diversity of Canadian not-for-profit boards. They surveyed 240 member organizations of Imagine Canada. Imagine Canada is a charity that delivers research and support to the not-for-profit sector. Most of the survey respondents were from relatively large organizations with an average budget of close to \$1 million, an average life span of 43 years, and a full-time staff of 11. The majority of these organizations were from Ontario. But most other regions of the country were represented. The organizations surveyed tended to be in the health or social welfare sectors.

What did the researcher find?

In terms of gender diversity, not-for-profit boards have

What you need to know:

Women have made great strides in being represented on not-for-profit boards. But board members from different ethnic backgrounds and visible minorities have made much less progress. Boards with greater diversity are the most effective.

come a long way. Women hold almost 44% of seats on the boards surveyed. In addition, 62% of those who completed the survey – a group made up of primarily CEOs and Presidents – were women. In other words, women are not only making it onto boards; they are gaining prominent roles in not-for-profits. Of the 240 boards surveyed, 12 were all-female and 4 were male. This pattern has held for over 20 years.

The boards that are the best at achieving diversity appear to be the most effective. These tend to be older boards, with more formal systems and processes in place. In general, organizations that have well-structured policies and procedures will tend to have addressed the need for diversity in some way; they will have drafted a policy on diversity or have a committee devoted to the goal. About a third of the boards that were surveyed have their own working definition of 'diversity.' Interestingly, boards striving to be more diverse seem to do so less because of pressure from donors or the government; boards aiming for diversity seem to do so out of a desire to better serve their increasingly diverse community.

Not-for-profit boards, however, are much less diverse when it comes to visible minorities and people from

different ethnic backgrounds. Whites are the most likely to be on boards (average of 87.6%). Aboriginals are the next most likely (8.2%), followed by South Asians (7.4%). Koreans are the least likely to be on not-for-profit boards (0.2%). 43.6% of boards are dominated by one group. In almost every case, this means the board will be white. In other words, the majority of boards have no diversity based on ethnicity or visible minority status. The senior leaders of these boards appear to be comfortable dealing with issues of diversity at meetings. But there is still relatively little discussion of diversity. Diversity is just not on the agenda of most not-for-profits. However, almost 28% had a board member who identified as having a disability or being openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

How can you use this research?

This report will help to inform the leaders of Canadian not-for-profits of the need for more diversity on their boards. Boards and the communities they serve are strengthened by diversity. But to increase diversity does not require a complete overhaul of the way things are done. Instead, making diversity a strategic priority and assigning a level of accountability can have a real impact.

Not-for-profits seeking to create a more diverse board should advertise in publications that are aimed at specific ethnicities. They should partner with ethno-cultural organizations and target individuals who are active in the community. In general, not-for-profits should do a better job at broadening their outreach. They should advertise in major newspapers; send E-mails to potential board members when positions become available; post vacancies on Web sites; and mobilize board members to recruit through their networks.

Not-for-profits need to widen their selections criteria when looking for new board members. They should target specific ethnicities and genders. They should also develop good connections with those elements of the community which they want to have represented.

Finally, not-for-profits can address diversity during self-

assessments. They can incorporate issues of diversity into board work plans. They can also make the board meetings themselves more open to diversity. They should hold meetings at times that are convenient for care-givers and in locations that are wheelchair accessible. They should welcome the cultural, dietary, and religious preferences of different people. Other languages and traditions should be embraced. The hearing impaired should be accommodated.

About the Researcher

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Citation

Bradshaw, P., Fredette, C., & Sukornyk, L. (2009). *A call to action: Diversity on Canadian not-for-profit boards*. Institute for Governance of Private and Public Organizations. Available online at <http://bit.ly/1qzQiBN>

Keywords

Board members, Diversity, Gender, Not-for-profits, Race, Sexual orientation

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York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

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