

Museums Accept Grant to Increase Diversity

08.29.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



About every two years, [BoardSource](#) conducts its “signature study” of the board practices and policies of U.S. charitable organizations. The most recent one, [Leading with Intent: 2017 National Index of Nonprofit Board Practices](#), includes participation by the nation’s museums in cooperation with the [American Alliance of Museums](#) (AAM). Leading with Intent prides itself with being the “only survey to gather information from both chief executives and board chairs on their experiences in the nonprofit boardrooms of America.”

In [BoardSource, Museum Board Leadership 2017: A National Report \(Washington, D.C.: BoardSource 2017\)](#), there was a finding that troubled association leaders, but did not surprise them. In a nutshell, while the U.S. population has become strikingly more diverse in recent years, America’s museum leadership has not kept up with this demographic trend: “46% of museum boards are 100% white compared to the average of nonprofits – 30%.”

Key Findings from the Report

“Museum directors and board chairs [believe board diversity and inclusion are important](#) to advance their missions, but have failed to prioritize action steps to achieve it,” according to the Summary of Findings. Just “10% of directors indicate that their boards have developed a plan of action to become more inclusive. The top three priorities for recruitment of board members are passion for the mission, community connections, and ability to fundraise.”

In the body of the Report, there are additional observations about the failure of museum leadership to reflect demographic changes. “A [fundamental challenge](#) for museums is that while the population is already one-third minority, heading towards majority minority, today only 9% of the core visitors to museums are minorities and approximately 20% of museum employees are minorities.” The Report authors assert that “[i]f museums want to be relevant to their communities, they must address these discrepancies.”

In another section, researchers note that “lack of diversity in board composition may be a network problem.” More simply stated, most museum boards are filled with older, rich white folks (more male than female) whose social and business circles are much the same. “These factors both explain and perpetuate the problem of board diversity.”

According to the data collected, the problem is not a lack of understanding or agreement by museum board chairs and directors that “diversity and inclusion” are important. They acknowledge that a change in that direction will “help advance their missions, especially when it comes to understanding the changing environment from a broader perspective, understanding the museum’s visitors, and “enhancing the organization’s standing with the general public.”

The problem in a nutshell is that few in leadership are “taking action.” Only 10% of museum boards have created a “plan of action for the board to become more inclusive.” And only 21% have changed their policies and procedures to achieve that goal.

Diversity Grant Awarded

There is hope that these dismal statistics may change with the announcement earlier this year of a \$4 million, 3-year, grant to the American Alliance of Museums by some of the nation’s foundations to **help push museums to become “more diverse and inclusive.”** Key funders of this initiative include the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Alice L. Walton Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. Each of these foundations has “shown a deep interest in the [diversity] effort.”

In a **press release**, AAM introduced its new “unprecedented national initiative to diversity museum boards and leadership” based on its report issued last year titled “Facing Change: Advancing Museum Board Diversity & Inclusion.” It was created by a group of museum professionals committed to the idea that “systemic change is vital to long-term genuine progress.”

How will AAM spend this money to achieve the stated goals?: by “introducing diversity standards across the field, leadership development for 50 museums in five cities (which have not yet been named), an online resource center and a program that matches individuals with museum boards.”

Conclusion

It will be interesting to see whether this grant-based approach will do the trick for museum leaders to move from concurring in vague platitudes and goals to taking concrete action that results in demonstrable demographic changes for board and executive leadership at America’s arts centers.