



125 Tower Drive
Burr Ridge IL 60527
630.734.5000
Fax: 630.734.5050
railslibraries.info

TO: RAILS Board members

FROM: Deirdre Brennan

RE: Board Diversity

DATE: January 19, 2022

As you will hear in our review of the strategic plan draft at the January 28 meeting, equity, diversity and inclusion are extremely important to our members. It became very clear during the member town halls, focus groups and other meetings that members want RAILS to help them in their efforts to provide more equitable, diverse and inclusive services, and help them find ways to diversify their own staff and boards. They want RAILS to provide leadership and model EDI best practices for libraries.

RAILS staff have already begun looking at ways RAILS can improve our internal culture, as you know, via our Climate Team and EDI training for all staff provided by Biz Lindsay-Ryan, our consultant.

It is important that we start at the top and work to increase the diversity of the RAILS board. I am suggesting that we overhaul our recruitment, nomination and election process as a first step.

Currently, we have a Nominating Committee that does not really function as a typical nominating committee. The existing process depends on individuals in member libraries – staff or trustees – to self-nominate. RAILS is responsible for communicating which seats are open – specific to library type, trustee or at large – accepting nominations, creating and posting an online ballot and then tabulating the results.

To diversify the board, we will have to be intentional in seeking out diverse candidates from under-represented communities and organizing the election process so that all under-represented communities have an equal chance to be elected to the board.

One possible model is the ILA Executive Board model, where individual candidates run against one another, not against the entire field of candidates. For example, two library trustees are nominated by the committee (not self-nominated) and compete directly against each other for the most votes. The same is true for each other designated seat on the ILA board. This ensures that there will be equitable representation and diversity across the entire ILA board.

I do not know if this is the best model for RAILS, I only describe it as an alternative.

I am proposing that we spend the next several months re-designing our election process, to take effect in 2023. We have some ideas about how we can make incremental progress this year, but we don't have enough time to put such a major change into place by the spring of this year.

As a first step, we recommend that we use our current vacancy as an opportunity to create appropriate criteria and recruit candidates among under-represented populations, from whom the Executive Committee will select an individual to fill out the term of Patricia Smith (an at large term, 2022 is the second year of the term).

The Board Policy Committee would oversee the development of the new policy and procedures and our Bylaws will be revised accordingly. In past meetings, we have discussed ways to publicize the role of the board and to increase election participation – candidate forums being one example - I think we can implement some of these suggestions during this year's election.

I have included an article about board diversity for your information.

I look forward to discussing this with you in more detail at the January meeting.

6 Steps to Increase Board Diversity at Your Nonprofit

[Organizational Management](#)

By Tatiana Morand

Table of Contents

- [Why is Board Diversity Important?](#)
- [1. Address what lies under the surface](#)
- [2. Get everyone involved](#)
- [3. Be proactive](#)
- [4. Make diversity a part of your mission – not just your mission statement](#)
- [5. Ask your members](#)
- [6. Make sure that your environment is conducive to diversity](#)
- [How to Create a Board Diversity Policy](#)
- [Related Resources:](#)

If you're concerned about your board's diversity, you're not alone.

[Statistics Canada conducted a survey between December 4, 2020 and January 18, 2021](#), surveying over 6,000 nonprofit board members and confirming that lack of diversity on nonprofit boards remains an issue.

The survey revealed that of the participating board members, only 11% identified as a visible minority, 8% as LGBTQ2+ individuals and 6% had a disability. These numbers differ drastically from how these groups are represented in the Canadian population.

Moreover, the same survey showed that only 30% of the participants said their organization had a board diversity policy. 23% did not know.

A [BoardSource study from 2018](#) shows similar findings in the United States. The diversity of nonprofit boards in their dataset was far from representative of the growing diversity of the U.S. population. For example, 4.2% of the surveyed board members identified as Hispanic, while the Hispanic population in the U.S. was nearly 18% of the total population at the time.

What this tells us is that there's still more work to be done. Nonprofit organizations across North America need to create and live out policies that ensure that the people on their board of directors are representative of their country's overall population.

Why is Board Diversity Important?

Nonprofit boards of directors oversee the strategic plan and make important financial and operational decisions for their organization. They have a lot of influence in how the nonprofit is run, its goals, programs and outcomes.

More often than not, the nonprofit sector serves people in need, people seeking equity and people in marginalized communities. Doesn't it make sense then, that the people in charge should be able to understand the needs of the people their organization serves?

A diverse nonprofit board that includes people of all genders, races, ages, sexual orientations, cultural backgrounds and levels of ability, will consider a variety of perspectives and ultimately make more informed decisions.

Organizations who lack a diverse board of directors lack those perspectives and are often at odds with the very mission they set out to accomplish.

If you're reading this post, that probably means you want to help create positive change – and you've come to the right place.

Is lack of diversity on nonprofit boards something that will change overnight? No.

However, there are many things your organization can do to combat prejudice and start thinking more about inclusivity.

Below, I've listed the six steps you can take if you want to start building a more diverse board. For each step, I've also added an action item you can take today.

Lastly, I've included some resources to help your organization come up with a board diversity policy or improve your existing one.

1. Address what lies under the surface

Bias is ugly. It's real. And it needs to be named to be changed.

[Unconscious bias](#) can shape all aspects of the hiring and recruiting process, from the way openings at your organization are posted to the experience employees or board members have once they're selected.

It also affects the way interviewers evaluate candidates and who is ultimately hired, as well as shaping the organizational climate. This will either allow all types of people to participate comfortably or force them to leave.

To get an inside perspective on this issue, I spoke with Lauren, the director of a professional association helping teachers and other educational leaders to improve special education programs.

“Ensuring diversity has always been a priority for our organization, but it can definitely be challenging because the teaching field is largely female and in our particular region, predominantly white,” she said.

And while race and gender are the most evident forms of diversity, they aren’t the only dimensions you need to consider.

A person’s age, nationality, sexual orientation, educational and professional background, level of ability, and socio-economic status can all shape their contributions to your board – and examining your assumption has around them can lead to the discovery of biases you didn’t know existed.

“We get a lot of interest and engagement from retired teachers who have more time to participate, but I always want to make sure we aren’t just building an echo chamber here,” she continued.

For example, some nonprofits may cite the perceived lack of fundraising power of younger applicants or applicants of colour when considering other candidates – but questioning why those two things are considered mutually exclusive should also be an important part of the conversation.

No one, and no organization, is perfect. However, checking your privilege, whatever form it comes in, is one of the first steps. This means thinking honestly about how your background shapes your current beliefs, and how you benefit from dominant ways of thinking in society – whether it’s as a white person, a straight person, or any of the other many intersections of inequality in society.

A few ideas to promote equity, that people with various kinds of privilege might not think of, include:

- Making your board meetings accessible to people with disabilities
- Acknowledging the Indigenous space your organization is built on
- Having gender-neutral bathrooms available
- Putting a mental health day policy into place

What you can do today:

Run a diversity audit to see how your entire organization, not just your board, stacks up. First, look at the demographic of your board. Then, look at the demographic of your community. Are there any groups that are underrepresented? How does your board (and your organization as a whole) compare to your community? If the two are vastly divergent, it might be time to rethink your recruiting – and ask yourself why there's such a gap.

2. Get everyone involved

Fostering diversity takes sustained and intentional action. At Lauren's association, everyone from the board chair to the office assistant knows that recruiting all different types of people is an organizational priority.

Creating an aligned vision will help ensure that all board members are taking steps to invite diverse people from their different networks to join the team. Asking your team and existing board for help also reflects that this isn't just a one-time effort, but a sustained part of your organization's mission going forward.

However, increasing diversity within your team can be an uphill battle if you're initially the lone voice bringing it up – or the only one who thinks it's important.

However, you might find that once you start speaking up, other people who didn't feel comfortable bringing it up join in and support you.

Diversity training within your organization can also help you gain support. Making resources available ([such as this style guide for inclusive language](#)) or having workshops with your team to train them on equitable practices is a good step to make sure the space you're creating is truly inclusive.

What you can do today:

At your next board or team meeting, take this [unconscious bias inventory](#) to begin unearthing assumptions that may be holding you back. Opening the conversation in a non-confrontational way, and showing that everyone has biases they need to overcome, will help you be more effective in the ongoing quest for equity.

3. Be proactive

If you want to build a more diverse board, just accepting referrals from current board members or those already connected with the organization isn't the best way to do it.

People tend to know people similar to them, and if you're already finding your board is too homogenous, you'll just be adding more of the same.

Instead, consider these ways to expand your recruiting reach:

- Post online on websites like idealist.org or createthegood.org, and take advantage of LinkedIn's targeting options.
- Blast your social media accounts with the open position, and ask your employees and members to share it too.
- Ask local organizations or associations who work with the communities you want to recruit for assistance.
- Identify events that attract the type of people you're looking to recruit, or go to their communities and start providing value, before having authentic, in-person conversations about why their involvement is critical.
- Ask partnering or neighbouring organizations who have more diversity within their organization about their strategies for board recruitment.

You should also be open about your organization's current level of diversity when recruiting. Communicating that your current hiring policies are part of an ongoing initiative to be more diverse will help reassure candidates that they're not just going to be a token.

And don't forget: people want to feel like you're recruiting them because of their passion for your mission, not because they check a demographic box. Focusing on the skills and talents of your ideal candidate, but prioritizing those who are underrepresented in the name of equity, will be much more successful than simply saying "We need a -insert demographic group here-."

What you can do today:

Include a statement of inclusivity on your next job post or board posting — and make sure you mean it.

Plus, remember that giving requirements can be a barrier for some groups. If you're primarily serving lower-income demographics, or want them to be represented, you'll need to be aware of this (and consider scrapping it).

4. Make diversity a part of your mission — not just your mission statement

If you find the people who are drawn to your organization are homogenous, it's time to consider whether something about your message isn't accessible or resonant for a more diverse population.

An explicit commitment to diversity made readily available on your website and materials (particularly anything related to hiring) could help attract those you are looking for. Amending your bylaws to state that a certain percentage of your board must come from the population you serve can also help reinforce your commitment. This suggests a commitment to action, rather than just giving lip service to the idea of diversity.

Some statements that you can use as inspiration and to support you as you write your own are:

- [Environmental Defence Fund \(EDF\)](#)
- [Young Nonprofit Professionals Network \(YNPN\)](#)
- [Americans for the Arts](#)

What you can do today:

Read the statements above as well as your own to see how you can work on it to make it more inclusive and reflect your pledge to diversity.