

Racial Tensions Between Presidents and Governing Boards

BY SHAUN R. HARPER





THROUGH ACTIVISM AND OTHER EFFORTS, generations of collegians have challenged higher education leaders to address long-standing racial issues on campuses. The underrepresentation of students, faculty, and administrators of color; culturally unresponsive curricula and teaching methods; racialized encounters ranging from occasional stereotyping and microaggressions to overt acts of racial violence; the presence of white supremacist statues and buildings named for eugenicists; and unacknowledged institutional participation in the American slave trade industry are just some of the racial problems students have protested for decades. Others have fought for ethnic studies departments and cultural centers. Most colleges and universities have made measurable progress on their pursuits of equity, diversity, and inclusion goals. Notwithstanding, students of color and their White allies in 2021 are still protesting many of the same challenges and unfulfilled promises for racial justice that were on the agendas of activists in prior eras. In many instances, lists of demands issued during this current movement of Black Lives Matter are nearly identical to those presented in the 1960s.

My role as the founder and executive director of the University of Southern California Race and Equity Center has afforded me opportunities to work with hundreds of colleges and universities in every geographic region of the United States. Our center has become the place that most leaders call for advice and analysis in the aftermath of racial crises on their campuses. We also provide them useful data through the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates, our quantitative survey that has been administered to more than one million undergraduates. Most of my recent higher education work entails advising presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and deans on racial equity topics ranging from crisis avoidance and disaster recovery to strategy development and implementation. At this point, I engage with dozens of senior leaders on a weekly basis. Fortunately, I have not yet met a president or chancellor who deemed racial equity unimportant—all tell me they are committed to it. But many seek my advice on one specific issue: negotiating the advancement of racial equity agendas with uncommitted and resistant governing boards. I present in this article four common questions that board members reportedly raise to presidents.

TAKEAWAYS

- While most colleges and universities have made measurable progress towards their equity, diversity, and inclusion goals, racial inequity remains. The underrepresentation of governing board members and presidents of color as well as racial tensions between governing boards and presidents are two key areas where progress must be made.
- When negotiating the advancement of racial equity agendas, these are the most common questions resistant governing boards raise to their presidents: Are our proposed actions too leftist and likely to alienate conservatives? Are we emphasizing racial equity efforts too much? Don't all lives matter? Aren't all our other institutional commitments to racial equity enough?
- There are at least four actions presidents and governing boards can do together to reduce racial tensions. First, acknowledge the racial tensions exist. Second, educate themselves on a variety of racial equity topics. Third, carefully examine data from campus racial climate surveys to gain a fuller understanding of their institution. Fourth, revisit lists of demands issued by student activists and their allies.
- When presidents and governing boards fail to properly address racial inequity on campus, they share the responsibility for threats to the institution's reputation as well as the blame for the institution's failure to enact its equity, diversity, and inclusion values.

Too Far Left?

Campus leaders say their board members worry that some proposed policy actions, practical strategies, and financial investments are too leftist and likely to alienate conservative students and employees. One example of this is the difference of opinion over the handling of hate speech. Communicating that a White person calling a Black person the N-word, dressing up in blackface for Halloween, or hosting a fraternity party with some students dressed as ICE agents and others as undocumented immigrants attempting to cross the United States-Mexico border is inconsistent with campus inclusion values and therefore should have consequences seems obviously important to me. But according to presidents, conversations about these and other racist acts are met with board members' defenses of free speech. Presidents are often surprised by how much time is spent arguing the merits of freedom of speech instead of talking about appalling acts of racial violence that have or could occur. Students who are most harmed by these experiences rely on campus leaders to protect them.

Many presidents say they feel a responsibility to do so, but can only go so far because some board members will misunderstand their efforts as too-liberal attempts to suppress or eradicate conservative viewpoints. To be fair, conservative student groups and alumni sometimes communicate these fears to governing boards.

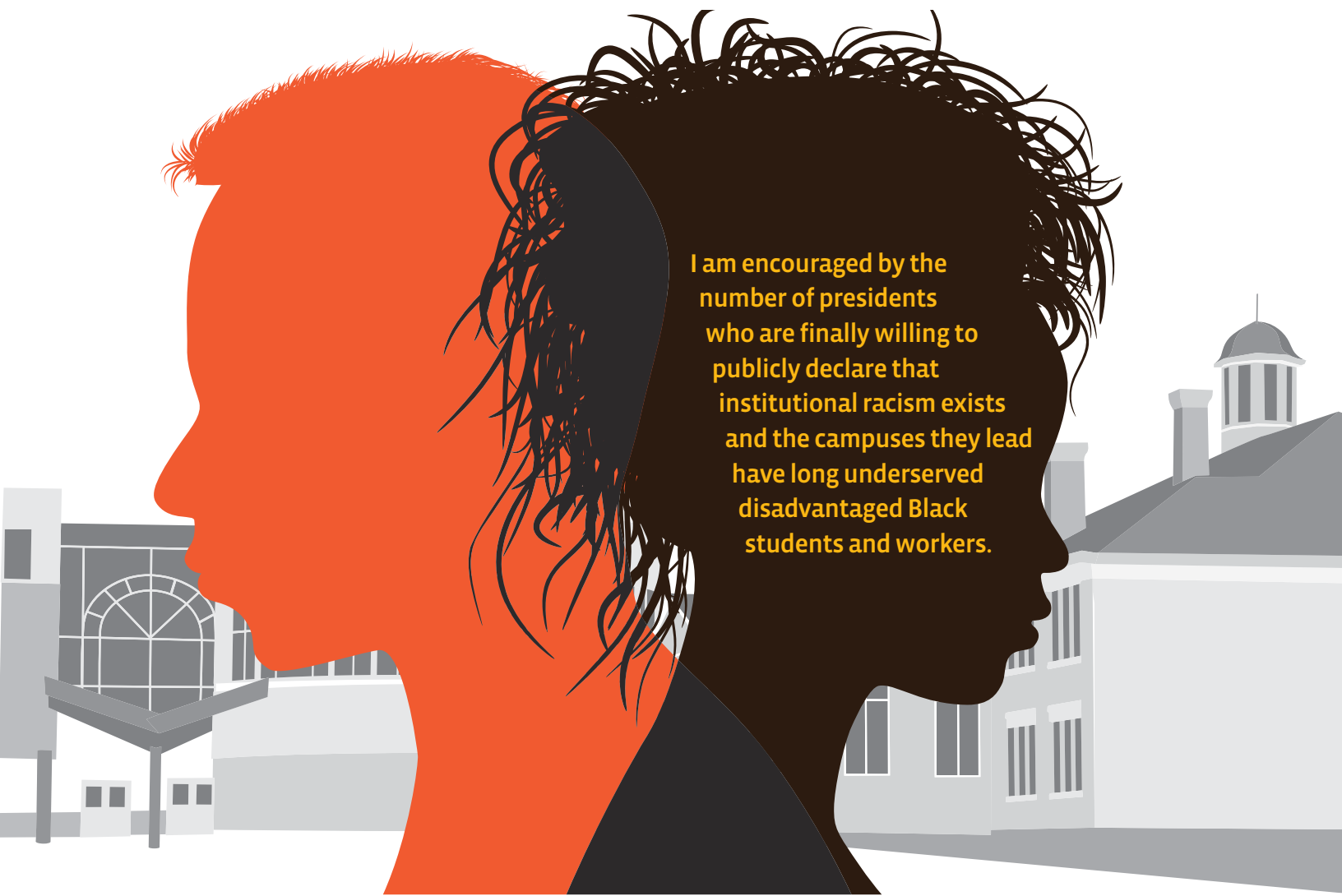
Too Much Emphasis on Race?

"Shouldn't we focus more of our attention on our neediest and first-generation students?" is a common question posed in board meetings to pivot from race to socioeconomic status. Some even argue that continuing to talk about race is racist, as it amplifies differences between people as opposed to celebrating our shared humanity. Moreover, board members occasionally argue that the campus has already invested enough time in racial equity efforts, and it is now time to move on to other diver-

sity imperatives. These are just a few of the ways presidents say their boards aim to minimize race or avoid it altogether in meetings. Even when disaggregated quantitative data clearly show gaps between students or employees from different racial groups, board members seek alternative explanations—anything but race. I find this unsurprising given that more than 80 percent of higher education governing board members are White. It is likely that the racial inequities captured in the data and the underlying racial problems being discussed are inconsistent with their own firsthand racialized experiences. It should be noted that 83 percent of college and university presidents are White. I suspect they are more willing to engage racial topics than are their boards because campus community members, especially people of color, are expecting White presidents to confront racial realities at their institutions. Yet presidents of color and their White presidential counterparts face the challenge of getting their boards to understand why more attention has to be placed on race.

Don't All Lives Matter?

My research, as well as studies published by numerous other credible scholars, consistently show that Black students are at the bottom of most statistical measures of opportunity, performance, and progress in U.S. higher education. In addition, hiring, tenure, promotion, retention, and advancement outcomes for Black employees almost always lag those of their White coworkers. These inequities persist year after year. The truth is, few institutions have ever been equitable for Black people. Among its myriad aims, the Black Lives Matter movement attempts to raise national consciousness about systemic racism and other factors that cyclically reproduce inequitable outcomes for Black Americans. I am encouraged by the number of presidents who are finally willing to publicly declare that institutional racism exists and the campuses they lead have long underserved disadvantaged Black



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students and workers. Activists and their supporters are pushing presidents to take meaningful, sustainable action. Presidents tell me they are personally committed to doing so. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor last summer and the global uprisings that subsequently ensued helped many of them realize what Black people on their campuses have been attempting to convey for years. One major problem, as presidents describe it to me, is that their governing boards lack an understanding of what the Black Lives Matter movement is and how it pertains to their institutions. Accordingly, too many board members erroneously believe a focus on Black lives would signal that other people's lives are somehow less valuable. Some others misunderstand Black Lives Matter to be a terrorist organization that burns down cities, or simply as a radical far-left group that wants police officers killed. There is not enough time on board meeting agendas to debunk these myths.

What About All the Other Actions We've Taken?

Recently appointing the first-ever governing board member of color, establishing a diversity and inclusion subcommittee of the board, selecting the institution's first Asian American president, creating a chief diversity officer position, building a new multicultural center, introducing a one-course ethnic studies requirement into the undergraduate curriculum, awarding an honorary doc-

torate to Justice Sonia Sotomayor, giving employees the day off for Juneteenth 2020, and hiring a Black football coach—those are all noteworthy demonstrations of institutional commitment to racial equity, no? Yes. Nonetheless, the challenge for presidents is that students, alumni, and employees of color do not view actions such as these as sufficient remedies for years of racial negligence and harm. Many more corrective actions are needed. Presidents seem to now understand this, but negotiating more actions, attention, and investments with their boards is tough. I suspect the recurrence of racial issues on campus compels some governing board members to ask if any set of activities or policy changes will ever be enough, and to doubt that people of color will ever be fully satisfied.

Three Acknowledgements

It seems important to acknowledge three things about the perspectives I have offered in this article. First, they are based on what I have repeatedly heard from presidents. It is entirely possible that governing board members would have a vastly different interpretation of how racial situations are handled in board meetings and in conversations with campus leaders. Second, I acknowledge my choice to believe what leaders tell me. I have no reason to suspect that presidents exaggerate or overstate the racial tensions with their board members that are described herein. It is plausible, how-

ever, that some presidents are not as committed to racial equity as they claim, and that they blame their boards instead of themselves for institutional inaction. As previously noted, all presidents with whom I interact tell me they are committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Some actually are not, but saying so seems inappropriate, especially during this era. Saying the board is blocking progress is politically less risky for a president than is confessing one's own resistance or personal carelessness for race work.

Third and most importantly, I must acknowledge how racial tensions play themselves out in particular ways among different groups of campus leaders and their boards. What I have presented thus far is based on conversations I have had with presidents across all racial groups, including White people. These tensions and political vulnerabilities are often exacerbated for Asian American, Black, indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and multiracial presidents. Because there are so few of them, they are often the first non-White persons to serve in the role on their campuses, and their governing boards are overwhelmingly (sometimes exclusively) composed of White members, presidents of color are especially burdened by the possibility of pushing board members too far on racial issues. Regardless of one's race or ethnicity, presidents serve at the pleasure of their boards. But attempting to advance a racial equity agenda is especially tricky for a Latina president serving at the pleasure of a mostly White board. Intersectionality further complicates this. If that Latina president is a lesbian reporting to a mostly White, male, heterosexual board, then she must navigate the complexities of being a person of color, a woman, and a queer campus leader. This undoubtedly places her at higher risk of fallout over racial misunderstandings with the board.

Reducing Racial Tensions

There are at least four things presidents and boards can do to eliminate, or at very least reduce racial tensions. The first is to acknowledge that tensions exist. It is painfully apparent to me that presidents do not feel safe communicating to their boards what they convey to me. A skillful external facilitator could help create a brave space for presidents to offer feedback to their boards, and for board members to explain the undercurrents of their resistance. Without this, unspoken racial tensions will go unexposed and will likely worsen over time. Second, presidents and board members must learn about a range of racial equity topics alongside each other. Here at the USC Race and Equity Center, we offer several rigorous professional learning experiences for senior higher education leaders. Our USC Equity Institutes, for example, bring together 20 senior leaders (usually presidents, their cabinet members, and a handful of other administrators) for an eight-week virtual professional learning series; they also collaboratively create institutional change projects. Rarely are governing board members involved. They should be. Additionally, boards should host racial

equity learning retreats that include all members (not just the diversity subcommittee) and presidents.

Third, presidents and boards, together, should carefully examine data from campus racial climate surveys as well as other data sources that show racial differences in student and employee opportunities, experiences, and outcomes. It is important to resist the minimization of racist institutional policies, cultures, and practices in the interpretation of these data. Raceless actions from boards will sustain, and in some instances worsen racial inequities that exist on campuses. And fourth, revisiting lists of demands issued by generations of student activists and their allies is something presidents and boards should do together. This could help board members understand why recent actions taken are insufficient in satisfying the expectations of students, employees, and alumni of color. Taking the most recent list of demands and creating campus workgroups separately for each demand is one approach I often recommend. Every workgroup should have at least one cabinet-level administrator, tenured faculty members, students, alumni, staff, and a governing board member. Workgroups like these also could be created for specific challenges and opportunities presented in racial equity strategic plans.

Conclusion

Safeguarding an institution's reputation is among the many responsibilities of a governing board. When a racial incident occurs on campus that makes national news, board members, presidents, and senior leadership team members often scramble to calm the crisis. Depending on its magnitude, boards sometimes fire presidents for their mishandling of racial situations. The culpability of the board is not often well understood in instances such as these—either by external audiences or by board members themselves. It could be that presidents actually tried to get the board to take serious, strategic action on racial problems, but members were resistant. It could also be that presidents felt unsafe raising these issues because of power asymmetries, lack of diversity on their boards, or racially offensive and dismissive statements that certain members made in previous meetings. Regardless of the reason, when presidents and boards fail to deal with racial issues, racial inequities, and people's experiential encounters with racism on campus, they share responsibility for threats to the institution's reputation. More alarmingly, they share blame for the institution's failure to enact its espoused equity, diversity, and inclusion values. ■

Shaun R. Harper, PhD, is a provost professor in the Rossier School of Education and the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. He also is the Clifford and Betty Allen Chair in Urban Leadership, the founder and executive director of the USC Race and Equity Center, and the president of the American Educational Research Association. He will offer keynote remarks during the AGB National Conference on Trusteeship, April 12–14, 2021 (virtual). Email: sharper@rossier.usc.edu.