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Twenty Years of Virginia Organizing: A Historical Analysis

Ruth A. Berta

Introduction

Virginia Organizing began in the rural southwest tip of Virginia in 1995. The purpose of this study was to identify the unique role that the Virginia Organizing State Governing Board (VOSGB) has had in governing the organization by assessing their membership diversity over time and determining the historical themes from this governing body's 20 years of meeting minutes.

Research Questions:

1. What themes emerge from the first 20 years of Virginia Organizing State Governing Board meeting minutes?
2. How has the diversity of the membership of the State Governing Board of Virginia Organizing changed or not changed over time and is it presently diverse?

Background

Studies have found that diverse boards are more dedicated to the organization's overall purpose than boards with limited to no diversity¹. One of the first functions of the VOSGB was to create their mission statement, which has three themes: empowerment, inclusion of typically silenced voices, and relationship building². This study was conducted in relation to these themes and on the premise that the VOSGB ought to function within them³. They are relevant to the VOSGB because empowerment theory holds that individuals have the ability to change and influence their surroundings by using power, not by taking resources from other groups, but to strengthen connections with others and give people voice in the group⁴. The inclusion of typically silenced voices in board membership is relevant because it has been found that members are generally aware of their board's composition and aim to increase participation of underrepresented groups because of the value of input from these populations⁵. The final mission theme of relationship building is also key to VOSGB functioning because of the concept of board capital—an idea which encompasses both human capital, such as an individual's knowledge and expertise, and social or relational capital, the power found in a person's networks—which is a key resource for organizations⁶.

Methods

The sample for the historical analysis to answer the first research question was the minutes of 20 years of State Governing Board meetings, which were located in the office of Virginia Organizing's executive director in Charlottesville, Virginia. I read these documents using the historical analysis method, and determined themes that emerged from the data.

The diversity assessment, which answered the second research question utilized demographic data about the entire population of the VOSGB. Demographic data for categories shown in the results was collected from Virginia Organizing's archived newsletters and annual reports and from the memory of the executive director.

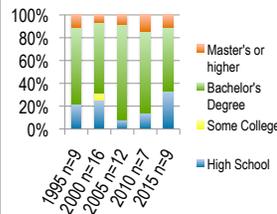
Historical Findings

The following themes were identified from the historical analysis of the Virginia Organizing State Governing Board minutes from 1995 to 2015:

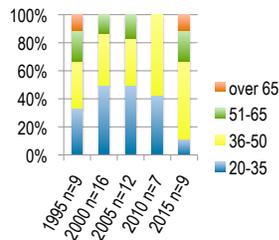
- Evidence of self-awareness of diversity and the importance of construct diversity to the overall organization's success
- Continual aims to remain transparent about the budget
- Emphasis on grassroots fundraising
- Attention on the organization's statewide media coverage and how VO relates to other organizations
- Continual evaluation of the organizing strategy; local at first statewide later on
- Annual analysis of power in the Commonwealth of Virginia

Diversity Findings

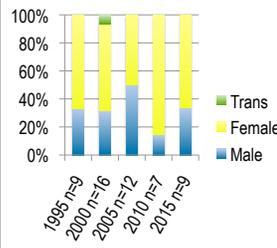
Highest Education Completed



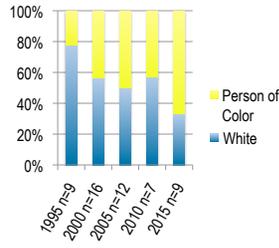
Age first year served



Gender



Race



Discussion

- Diversity analysis shows some tendencies toward female board members; race varies; typical highest education completed is a bachelor's degree; and most board members are under 50 when they first serve.
- Data does not show many noteworthy changes in diversity percentages.
- Board number shifts overtime are due to an organizational change around 2003 when the organization reassessed how they were working with other groups; instead of having affiliates they moved to having special programs.
- The board initially focused more on local campaigns until capacity was built; then emphasized statewide campaigns and shifted to overseeing more of the governance functions.

Limitations

- Dichotomization of race into 'white' and 'people of color'. This denotation is controversial, but it is used by Virginia Organizing because it is true to the political construct of race which creates the benefits of white privilege that people of color, regardless of race, are denied access to.
- Collection of demographic data as of November of each year; chosen because it is the month in which the board meets to accept the following year's proposed budget, however, it is possible that board membership changes in other times of the year have been missed

Implications

- Greater understanding of the role and importance of diversity for rural community organizations
- Nuanced perspective on the role of power from this organizational context
- Increased awareness of the importance of historical knowledge and its implication for current organizational practice

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