

Identifying Minorities for Community Boards¹

Beverlyn Lundy Allen²

Introduction

The ability of a community organization to diversify its board is dependent on the time and energy that current members are willing to invest. A well planned approach to identifying potential minority members is an important step in the planning process. Accordingly, this is the first article in a two-part series on the identification and recruitment of minorities for your board.

Most groups understand that recruitment is an important step in obtaining minorities for their governing boards. However, prior to the recruitment of minorities for your organization, the first task is to identify them. This article provides some tips on how to do so. First we consider pertinent questions to ask. Next we review the importance of doing your homework and the information you may need to make initial contact. Lastly, we discuss the important role local minority leaders and their affiliate associations may play in this initial stage.

Ask Yourself the Right Questions

Each organization has to ask itself some hard questions. While these questions will vary from one situation to the next, they usually will take the following forms:

“Why do we want minority board members?”

It is very important that everyone in the organization is clear on the reason(s) for minority recruitment. Potential problems can be avoided if everyone is on the same page. Ideally, the primary reason for desiring increased diversity is for the organization to benefit from new ideas and perspectives. Diversity for cosmetic purposes is unethical and self-defeating in the long-term.

“What type of minority individuals are we looking for?”

This is a very key question. Minority individuals are just that – individuals. There is

-
1. This document is FCS 9094, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: May 2003. First published: July 1998. Reviewed: May 2003. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
 2. Written by Beverlyn Lundy Allen, former assistant professor, Human Resource Development and reviewed by Elizabeth B. Bolton, professor, Leadership Development and Adult Education, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap, or national origin. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office. Florida Cooperative Extension Service / Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences / University of Florida / Christine Taylor Waddill, Dean

just as much diversity within each minority group as there is within the majority group. Your organization should avoid the trap of searching for the “super minority” individual. No extraordinary characteristics should be necessary for board membership. Whatever basic qualities that your existing board members have should be sufficient. Besides, usually “super minority” individuals are already over-committed. Just as there are few “super majority” individuals, the minority variety is just as scarce.

“Why would minority individuals want to join this board?”

This question gets to the heart of what your organization is about. Does it have the type of atmosphere that would make minorities feel welcome? What are the benefits of board membership, and are they likely to be important to minorities? Is your mission alone sufficient to encourage minorities to be a part of the board? Perhaps the most important question here is, “Is this organization willing to change if that’s what it takes to recruit minority board members?”

Do Your Homework

One of the ironies about life in America is most majority group members know very little factual information about minorities! Most people “know” about minorities based upon T.V., stereotypes, and limited individual situations or experiences. Your board should take the time to learn about the experiences of minorities in America. This means understanding society from their perspectives. Often times, things that majority group members take for granted are not the same for minorities. Bring in the experts to educate, and perhaps sensitize, your membership. Gain an understanding of minority issues and history at the local level – particularly in the communities where you will be making contacts. This way, time and money aren’t wasted making unwarranted assumptions and mistakes.

Some Good Reasons for Identifying Members Throughout the Community

- *There will be more representation of the full community.*
 - *Your group will stand to gain broader community support.*
 - *There is opportunity for different opinions and therefore better decision making.*
 - *A multi-sector membership may result in a larger membership.*
 - *Potential for more and varied talent at the disposal of the organization.*
 - *Different and new ideas can spark new community initiatives.*
 - *And of course multi-sector membership leads to new community relationships.*
-
-

Contact Community Associations and Leaders

One of the ways to identify current leaders is through local associations and vice versa. Identifying local leaders will probably lead you to local associations. An association is usually a group of local citizens joined together with a vision or a goal. These associations may be formal or informal groups with or without elected officers and/or paid staff.

Informal groups may be networks of extended family through child care arrangements or a network of friends who have organized a book club. Formal organizations may include local churches, the cultural arts program, the local NAACP or a local sorority/fraternity service program. Regardless of the status of local associations, they do vital community work and are important in identifying potential minority members.

The existing leaders are known through these associations. Contacting minority community leaders is a must. Let them know what you are planning. Often times community leaders can provide you with suggestions and strategies that can save you time and money in identifying potential minority candidates. Most importantly, you will need their support if you are to have a successful recruitment program. It is not an exaggeration to say that often a word from these leaders can make or break your recruiting efforts.

TIPS to remember:

- **Be honest...** Say you don't know, if a question comes up that you don't have an answer to. Tell them you will find out and let them know. Remember to follow-up.
 - **Be yourself...** Keep an open mind, be friendly and smile.
 - **Be persistent...** Hesitation does not mean NO, give more information and/or ask more questions.
-
-

Summary

This article provided some helpful information about identifying minority candidates for your board. Clearly, in order to recruit minorities, they must first be identified.

This process involves making a long-term commitment to recruitment, asking the right questions and doing your homework. Identifying minority candidates also requires a community focus and the support of community leaders. Following these steps, you have begun to lay a solid foundation for minority recruitment.

References

- Homan, M. (1994). *Promoting Community Change: Making it Happen in the Real World*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Altman, D., Balcazar, F., Fawcett, S., Seekins, T., Young, J. (1994). *Public Health Advocacy: Creating Community Change to Improve Health*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention.
- Bobo, K., Kendall, J., Max, S. (1991). *Organizing for Social Change: A Manual for Activists in the 1990s*. Minneapolis, MN. Midwest Academy.
- U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1993). *Together We Can: A Guide for Crafting a Profamily System of Education and Human Services*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.