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Governance Boards and Student Activism: Responding to Racism

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Abstract: Colleges and universities continue to contend with issues of campus racism, often illuminated by student concerns. Within these ongoing conversations, governance boards play a critical part in engaging with campus issues. Utilizing critical discourse analysis, this study examines two universities through 2000 documents of board meeting minutes, agendas, student newspapers, and campus archives to scrutinize the language, framing, and decision-making of board efforts with diversity, equity, inclusion, and addressing student concerns. Findings illuminate aspects of the Institutional Response Framework and interest-convergence in the ways boards rationalize decisions through concerns about reputation and protecting the university's best interests.

Keywords: governance boards; board of trustees; student activism; campus accountability; racism; student protests



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1. Introduction

Higher education governance boards are a collective set of individuals who, alongside the faculty and university president (or chancellor), are responsible for carrying out the mission and vision of their respective campuses [1,2]. Otherwise known as shared governance, this responsibility for governance boards often includes a fiduciary role in maintaining, growing, and/or recovering the financial health of their college or university [3]. Board decisions range from determining vendors for university contracts to approving or rejecting tenure and promotion recommendations for faculty, as well as countless other policies that impact the day-to-day operations of university life amongst students, staff, faculty, and administrators.

With this power and decision-making, boards both reflect and shape the institutional priorities of colleges and universities, including efforts with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) [2]. Colleges and universities have attempted and need to continue to address the long-standing racism, anti-Blackness, and settler-colonialism entrenched within their respective campuses, which includes but is not limited to the intimate involvement in slave economies in building U.S. colleges and universities, the systematic barring of admissions of Black Americans through the racialized utilization of the G.I. Bill, and the excavation on indigenous bodies for “medical purposes” [4]. Boards can play a pivotal and critical role in institutionalizing this racism through determining what to acknowledge, rectify, and prioritize. The focus of DEI efforts has predominantly centered on the role of students, with growing literature focusing on the roles of faculty and campus leaders such as senior administrators. Yet, as a growing body of research indicates, governance boards play a crucial role in how universities frame and address their responses regarding campus racism, such as in determining whether to change the controversial names of historical landmarks [5]. Boards either constrain, support, or advance equity-oriented agendas through their policies and actions.

Drawing on the Institutional Response Framework [6], this study utilizes discourse analysis to examine governance board minutes and recorded videos of two university boards in the southern United States from 2015 to 2018. More specifically, we examine how the governance boards at the University of Virginia and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill frame their policies on diversity, equity, race, and inclusion as a response, in part, to student and faculty activism. Study findings illustrate how deeply ingrained responses are within university branding, impacted by board membership, and subject to state policies.

2. Background and Literature Review

The heterogeneity of colleges and universities, particularly in their structure, has resulted in a variety of different names for governance boards, which include but are not limited to: Board of Trustees, Board of Visitors, Board of Governors, and Board of Regents [3]. Governance boards can refer to both individual universities as well as university systems at-large (e.g., University of California system which is governed by the Board of Regents) with different roles and visions.

2.1. Governance Board Structures and Responsibilities

Governance boards can broadly be construed with differentiations between governing and coordinating which have implications for DEI efforts [7]. Overlapping responsibilities include overseeing accountability or performance measures; approving institutional missions; and developing master or strategic plans. While governing boards typically approve executive level hiring, awarding of degree and credentials, and monitor institutional effectiveness, coordinating boards administer financial aid/loans and support the data infrastructures of systems and individual institutions [3,7]. Boards overseeing multiple higher education institutions across the state are often coordinating boards, whereas the boards at each campus are governing boards. Governance boards wield considerable power in constructing and positioning specific policy conversations, particularly related to the institution's role in economic development, potential contributions of community needs, and a focus on accountability measures [2]. In that sense, boards are not merely symbolic figures but actively engage through fiscal decision-making, the priorities of the institution [8].

These responsibilities and priorities of governance boards, whether coordinating or governing, are a critical foundation in understanding the potential impact to DEI efforts. Morgan et al. [9] describes boards as “electrical sockets” that can potentially power the visibility of these issues within the policy and operations of a university; thus, as institutions transform their curriculum, priorities, and services, boards can be critical partners and work with external and internal stakeholders to address DEI challenges. Their involvement must be ongoing and expand beyond the traditional views of what constitutes “fiduciary duties” to engage in a genuine effort toward institutional transformation.

2.2. How Boards Engage in Diversity Work and with Student Activists

The literature on the activism within boards generally focuses on their engagement with state politics (e.g., [10,11]) rather than their relationship with student activists. Yet, at the same time, given how boards co-construct and shape how and what institutions advance and prioritize, this includes at times, their willingness to engage with issues of equity [2]. Yet, across this wide range, governance boards in higher education have minimal involvement regarding campus-wide issues of diversity—at most, focusing on the approval of faculty appointments and reviewing student demographic reports [1].

Scholars (e.g., Rall et al., [12]) contend that board makeup is a critical consideration in the connections, or lack thereof, with concerns regarding DEI, especially when mostly white boards are making decisions that will impact Students of Color and/or students whose identities are not reflected in governance boards.

Student involvements with governance boards changed with the formal position and inclusion of a student representation (also known as a student trustee), which was a result of student activism in the 1960s [13]. Rall and Galan [14] emphasize how boards can foster spaces to student representatives to meaningfully engage with campus and community concerns. Yet, on the other hand, Lozano [13] highlights how the addition/involvement of student trustees has had little impact on moving along institutional DEI efforts and the agenda of student activists; instead, these student representatives are socialized to fulfill most board members' traditional involvement and do not actively advocate for student concerns.

To reconceptualize board involvement, membership, and priorities, Rall et al. [15] offer a new framework of culturally sustaining governance as a way for boards to recognize and prioritize equity goals. They along with Morgan et al. [9] contend that boards have not only the power, but also the duty to help institutions restructure themselves to create policies that benefit all constituents, particularly historically marginalized populations. We leverage the idea that boards have a duty to prioritize equity goals and historical contexts to determine how boards, through their framing, language, and policies, engage with the concerns and demands from student activists, particularly in relationship with issues of racism and DEI.

3. Guiding Theoretical Framework

In considering the role of governance boards with institutional accountability, the guiding framework for this study integrates aspects of Cho's Institutional Response Framework [6], with interest-convergence [16,17], to frame how governance boards maintain and arguably uphold institutional racism through their policies, practices, and responses to student activism.

3.1. Institutional Response Framework

The Institutional Response Framework, as the name suggests, is the three-dimensional model based on the spectrum of demands, power, and racialization [6]. In leaning on Critical Race Theory as well as several organizational theories (e.g., isomorphism and resource dependency), the framework illuminates how institutions range in their responses. It specifically asks if institutions are meeting external (in this case, student) demands, and how that then is complicated with the role of power and understanding itself as a racialized organization [5,6]. As seen in Figure 1, on the left-hand side, the first two dimensions of demands and power within the Institutional Response Framework create four different response types: schisming or creating a distance from demands through silence or even criminalizing student activists; appeasement or creating short-term solutions without long-term investment; co-option, which translates to adopting student demands but without their insight or involvement; and lastly partnership, by which demands are made in community with students.

From these four different response types, the third dimension of racialization reflects the extent to which an organization understands itself as a racialized structure. In alignment with Ray's theory of racialized organizations [18], organizations including higher education institutions are not "neutral." Instead, the ways that post-secondary institutions allocate resources, prioritize concerns, and determine measures of success and promotion, all reflect larger systems of oppression, including racism. The right-hand side of Figure 1 offers a visual with the third dimension of racialization with the Institutional Response Framework and in doing so, offers a unique tension that partnership with student demands can be either racially conscious but can also demonstrate racial evasiveness [5]. Focusing on this potential dichotomy, we were able to interrogate responses from governance boards through a multifaceted lens, not only from a two-dimension standpoint of what was their response, but how that response reflects a larger relationship to what Ahmed [19] describes as the institutionalization of racism. Racism and responses to racism are not limited to interpersonal relationships, but are embedded in the second nature of unspoken

norms, policies, and practices within an institution [19]. Combined with the Institutional Response Framework is an additional concept related to the institutionalization of racism: interest-convergence.

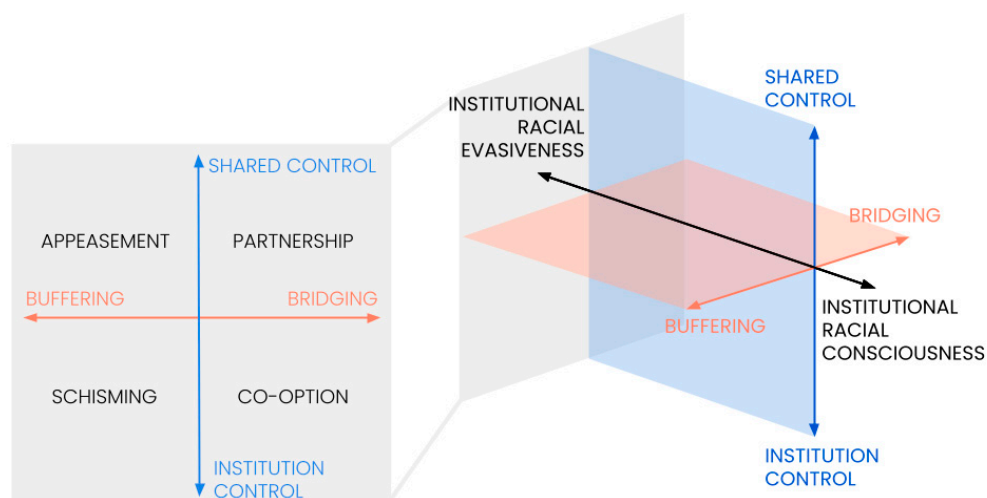


Figure 1. The Institutional Response Framework [6].

3.2. Interest-Convergence

Critical Race Legal Scholars have illuminated how even when making decisions that align with racially just outcomes, that these decisions are often motivated by self-interests—a phenomenon described as interest convergence [16,17]. The decision to desegregate school districts from *Brown v. Board* had less to do with educational equity and more to do with protecting the interests of capitalism and the interests of white leaders who recognized this decision as monetarily beneficial [16]. For example, diversity and its benefits are framed more for global competitiveness or for the benefit of white students to experience non-white cultures, rather than as a value in it of itself or a marker of equity [17]. The particular focus on the board of trustees, beyond its status as an understudied group, attempts to illuminate pathways of power in how racial justice and diversity initiatives shift depending on campus actors.

4. Materials, Methods, and Overall Research Design

To examine the role of governance boards and their response to student activism efforts, we utilized critical discourse analysis to better understand “the institution” within institutional responses. Specifically, we examined two public universities (for accessibility) and their respective governance board systems. In addition, we specifically chose institutions with highly publicized national student protests to illuminate the tension and accountability boards face in respective to their university brand and reputation. The study time-period was from 2015 to 2018 with additional historical and archival methods to contextualize this time frame. Leaning on case study’s concept of literal replication—or choosing cases that were similar to one another see [20]—we determined the sites as the University of Virginia (UVA, Charlottesville, VA, USA) and the University of North Carolina (UNCCH, Chapel Hill, NC, USA). With both universities being public and all information being publicly available, we intentionally chose to not anonymize the institutions, which also ensures more detailed descriptions.

4.1. Institutional Context

Both UVA and UNCCH reside in the geographic South within the United States, with historic (and arguably still present) ties to slavery [4]. Both universities are the public flagship universities of their respective states, though UNCCH is the flagship campus within the larger UNC system. The UNC system has a system-wide board, the Board of Governors, but each campus within the system has its own Board of Trustees. Both institutions are

research-intensive universities (by the Carnegie Classification system), with strong athletic programs, and robust alumni engagement. In Fall 2015, racial demographics at both universities were approximately 70 percent white, and within the 2015 to 2018 time frame, both had campus-wide events and student protests that made national headlines. By the end of 2018, both UVA and UNC Chapel Hill's most senior leadership, their president and chancellor, respectively, resigned.

In terms of board composition, UVA's Board of Visitors consists of 17 members, along with two non-voting members, a faculty representative and student representative. The 17 voting members are appointed by the governor and out of the total, 12 must be university alumni. Board terms for voting members are four years with an option to renew for one additional year; non-voting members serve one-year terms. The chair of the Board of Visitors, or the rector, serves a one-year term. Together, these 19 members meet approximately seven times a year, which includes an annual retreat; specific committees such as those related to finance, grounds, academic life, meet additionally. For UNC Chapel Hill, their Board of Trustees is 13 members, for which 8 are determined by the larger UNC Board of Governors, 4 are appointed by the North Carolina General Assembly, and 1 is the student body president as an ex-officio member. Like UVA, terms are four years with the ability to renew a term, for a maximum of 8 consecutive years served. While the UNC Chapel Hill Board of Trustees meet approximately six times a year, and additional meetings for committees, they held emergency meetings in 2018 following the student protests that led to the toppling of Silent Sam.

Two important distinctions for both institutions are their positional context. UVA made academic headlines in 2012 when its then-rector attempted to remove the president and violated academic governance [21]. With weeks of student and alumni protests following the abrupt termination, the president was reinstated and served until her resignation in 2018. This socio-political history serves as a critical juncture in the relationship between UVA, its board, president, alumni, and students. UNCCH's position in the larger UNC system places an additional layer of coordinating with its Board of Trustees and senior leadership also needing to respond to the UNC Board of Governors and the UNC system-wide president.

4.2. Materials and Data Collection

Central to the data collection were the campus documents related to the respective boards of the UVA's Board of Visitors and the campus-level board of UNCCH, the Board of Trustees. For these respective boards, the data corpus included not only board minutes and agendas, but also included the slide decks, notes from sub-committee meetings, related interviews with the student and/or local newspaper, as well as transcripts from publicly recorded board meetings.

With the University of Virginia, their Board of Visitors had 21 regular meetings between 2015 to 2018. Within the board, we examined specific committees, such as the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, that had clear connections to students' concerns with racism and racial relations. Moreover, we also examined other committees such as the Building and Grounds Committee given that some of the racism-related concerns from students included renaming buildings, and utilized snowball networking for when other committees were referenced. Page lengths for committees were from 7 to 30 pages and whole board meetings could easily be well over 300 pages when including appendices. For the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and their Board of Trustees, in addition to the process utilized for the University of Virginia, we also specifically searched for terms related to their most well-known student protests between 2015–2018: the Confederate statue known as "Silent Sam" specifically with the Board of Governors (and the larger North Carolina system). In all, these documents were well over 200 in number.

In addition to data corpus related to UVA's and UNCCH's respective boards, we also explored the flagship student newspaper publications. We chose this avenue of triangulation given the cyclical dynamic of student protests and racism-related concerns on campus (see [6,22]), and examined over 2500 student articles that were related to their

concerns, demands, and protests regarding campus racism. Articles were determined through search terms such as “protest,” “board,” and “racism” and then read through for relevancy and connection.

4.3. Data Analysis

Prior to conducting data analysis, we developed institutional reports through campus archives, secondary historical information, as well as drawing from demographic data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. These institutional reports provided both historical and current context for what then set the stage for analysis. Moreover, the reports illuminated repeated patterns and influence of positional power (regarding board decisions). These patterns helped shape our initial analysis and categorizing of broad themes (similar to Iverson [23]), to then engage in first cycle coding through *in vivo codes* (see [24]). These initial codes and broad themes then helped shape the second cycle of coding that utilized Saldaña’s *values coding* [22] to specifically look at the way each of the campus boards might be framing their argumentation through values and mission-like language. Given the data corpus size, our coding centered on larger bucketed themes [25], through the qualitative software Dedoose, that would then illuminate which documents would be analyzed for a more in-depth approach with critical discourse analysis and considering the role of power (see [22]).

To engage in critical discourse analysis (CDA), we narrowed the data corpus to identify a select number of documents—often those with multiple codes and earmarked as “mic drop” to signal importance. Concretely, codes such as “contraction” under the values-coding served as points of interest as these texts often suggest multiple and/or conflicting values at hand that could benefit from being examined through CDA. Critical discourse analysis offers an analytical frame to engage with text and dialogue to interrogate the multifaceted and multi-layered dynamics of power, people, and position [26]—specifically offering distinctions between what was said, what was perceived, and how positional differences (e.g., student, board member) changed what was communicated. For example, the language of “best interests” begs the question of best interests for what and for whom, and this framing became a pivotal finding of this study.

After the institutional reports, broad qualitative analysis, and more in-depth analysis, we determined initial findings through a racialized lens and particularly scrutinized how racial evasiveness could be masked in word choices, and phrases. By focusing first on specific themes through CDA, we were then able to map these findings back to the larger, broader themes across the multitude of institutional statements. As such, these findings were then drawn from not only the specific words or phrases from Board minutes, but then contextualized with student articles and campus contexts to determine the engagement and reactions of UVA and UNCCH’s governance boards and their respective student activists, specifically related to issues of DEI and racism.

5. Results

From our analysis, we concretized four findings specifically related to the framing of history, peer comparisons, protecting institutional interests, and restructuring priorities. More specifically, findings reveal how boards attempt to address racist histories and racism-based student protests without explicitly naming racism. In doing so, both UVA and UNCCH utilize institutional interests as a neutral goal, without acknowledging the ways this framing is racially evasive, especially with its impact on marginalized communities. To better understand these findings, we first outline the main concerns students at UVA and UNCCH had regarding their respective campus’s responses to racism and DEI efforts.

5.1. Student Activism and their Concerns

At both UVA and UNC Chapel Hill, student concerns regarding campus racism are two-fold: the first is based on contemporary contexts and specific manifestations of racism on their campus (during the 2015–2018) period; the second is rooted in the respective

histories and legacies both universities have in relationship to slavery, the Confederacy, and the KKK.

For the students at UVA, their contention with history is deeply intertwined with its founder, Thomas Jefferson, and how despite his declaration for rights and freedom, remained a slaveholder. More specifically, their concerns centered on UVA's continued celebration of the founder, without reconciling Jefferson's role in maintaining slavery. Similarly, students additionally had concerns about the university's lack of acknowledgment of the enslaved Black laborers who constructed the university. For them, these historical roots are intertwined with the continuous fight that Students of Color, and especially Black students, have had to engage to exist at the university. By the start of 2015, several decades of reports had been written, both by student groups and by administrative task forces, at the state of affairs for racially marginalized students and the ways they remain unsupported. This then boils over into the start of 2015, with two key events at UVA: the police-brutality of Martese Johnson, a Black student, in 2015; and the "Unite the Right" white supremacist rally in Charlottesville and the campus in 2017, which led to subsequent protests in response and the student demands to remove the statue of Thomas Jefferson.

At UNC Chapel Hill, students' concerns are deeply intertwined with the university's history with the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). This is focused not only on the naming of specific buildings (e.g., what used to be known as Saunders Hall) or landmarks (like Confederate statue, Silent Sam), but also white supremacist ideals that remain ever present on campus. With these decades of student protests, students, especially the Black student groups and activists at UNC Chapel Hill, actively advocated for the renaming of monuments and campus symbols to celebrate Black activists (such as what would become the Sonja Haynes Stone Center). The cycles of continued protests came to a head in 2015 over several KKK-affiliated buildings and again in 2017 and 2018 over the year-long protests regarding Silent Sam. These protests, which amassed hundreds and thousands of allies and counter protesters, sparked further conversations about the role of campus police, the responsibility of the university to keep students safe, and what it means to contend with history.

5.2. Reframing History and Student Concerns

Across the data corpus, one of the main disconnects in documentation was the difference of how student articles discussed racialized manifestations on campus or campus history, compared to the framing and language used within board meeting minutes. Board language was much broader and often centered on issues that felt not quite aligned with protests or demands. Instead of explicit reference to racism, the conversations were much more centered on diversity and inclusion. For example, UNCCH's framing and connection to the Confederate centered on a "troubled past" and "controversial history" rather than explicitly naming the foundational issue, white supremacy. Similar at UVA, following the assault and police brutality against Johnson at UVA, which many students linked to enduring campus racism, the March 2015 minutes from the Diversity Committee internally contextualized how they are "[seeing] an awful lot of upsetting information about . . . the application of the criminal justice system to the African American community and in particular African American men." In many ways, having the specific reference to African American men and the injustices of the criminal justice system is an important acknowledgement. Yet, for students, particularly student activists, this might still be evading what they view as the core issue. During that same meeting, when racism was explicitly named, it was by the student presenters, invited by UVA's Board of Visitors.

Framing issues as troublesome, upsetting or controversial, offers potential for interpretation which might be necessary given the wide spectrum of political opinions and perspectives governance boards engage. This hedging towards ambiguity can conversely also be concretized because of context—especially in the wake of tragedy or crisis. While the Unite the Right rally prompted an emergency meeting for UVA's Board of Visitors, the explicit references to white supremacy were found not in the board meetings and what can

be seen as internal minutes, but instead in remarks from the rector to the entire campus. However, in the following months, the comments follow the hedging type patterns of interpretation. Due to the purpose of the board in determining university mission and maintaining the financial health of the university, which includes navigating different audiences—potentially local, state, and federal policy makers—the framing and language reflects within this pattern, rather than explicit language towards racial justice.

5.3. Comparative Reputation and Peer Pressure

As evidenced across the data corpus within each institution, boards consistently discussed rankings and benchmarks of peer institutions (especially during the times rankings were annually announced). Board of Trustee members described UNC Chapel Hill's placement in Kiplinger's Personal Finance Rankings, and the October 2015 board minutes included the following statement, "this [U.S. World News and Report ranking] is one that universities, high school students and parents across the country pay attention to. It's reassuring to know we're keeping good company with the best peer public and private campuses." Note the usage of "good company" and "best peer" that convey meaning without clear definition of what constitutes either category, except a validation with rankings.

At the same time, the gravitation towards peer institutions offers an opportunity to create comparative standards for academic success. For example, the board explored the faculty retention practices of Vanderbilt University and the University of California, Berkeley to gain insight into their own efforts. These peer institution comparisons were more than the adoption or adaptation of exemplar practices. The Board of Visitor reliance on examining UVA's peer institutions bled into their rationale for the decision-making process, with conversations about diversity being related to institutional branding, reputation, rankings, and what is the quality of education they offer.

With governance boards focused on keeping up with peer institutions, the commitment towards faculty diversity is less a response towards student concerns about racial representation, but more a concern about how losing Faculty of Color will negatively impact retention, recruitment, scholarship production, and ultimately rankings. Metrics, as seen in UVA's June 2015 Diversity and Inclusion Committee, are framed as "Where we stand compared to AAU peers" for their faculty diversity plan. This rationale is one that students both understand and utilize. For example, when students pressed to departmentalize the African American and African Studies program during 2016–2017, then-student body president, Daniel Judge included the following in his statement:

Almost all of our peer institutions already have departments. These include, but are not limited to, UCLA, UC Berkeley, Syracuse, Duke, UNC, Harvard, and Yale. These departments have been successful and we would likely experience a similar success.

Likewise in 2018, UVA student groups, Asian Leaders Council and the Latinx Student Alliance, referenced peer institutions in their respective demands about creating an Asian American Studies department and a Latinx space on campus. In all three examples, students have consistently utilized the language of "success" to align with the board's emphasis on quality. While some could argue that this emphasis on quality problematically does not include a rationale or intersection with racial justices, others would point to this as a phenomenon of interest-convergence and co-option so that programs receive institutional support. In doing so, this institutional support, though vaguely defined through a lens of quality, offers the opportunity for institutionalized racial consciousness and supporting the demands of marginalized students.

Moreover, board adoptions of racially oriented decisions, can well align with a desire to be ahead of the times, or to be first. For example, UVA's Buildings and Grounds Committee (a committee within the Board of visitors) renamed the Alderman Road Residence Hall Building #6" to "Gibbons House" for enslaved Black couple William and Isabella Gibbons. In doing so, then-Rector Martin observes the significance of this decision, stating how "there are few peer institutions that have named buildings after slaves." UVA founded Universities Studying Slavery, a consortium of over 90 members examining the relationship

between the campus and slavery, where the public messaging for UVA has been lauded one of the first of its kinds.

5.4. *A University's "Best Interests"*

For the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill a common framing within their Board of Trustee meeting minutes was the language of "best interest." UNC Chapel Hill's reputation includes not only a relationship to ranking, but also a relationship to state-wide perceptions. More specifically the university often utilized the phrase "Carolina's best interest" without clear distinction whether board members were speaking about the university or the state. This ambiguity reflects the tenuous relationship and pressure the flagship university felt in responding to state concerns and upholding reputation. For example, the opening remarks from then-Board of Trustee chair Lawrey Caudill for the January 2015 meeting included how, "Carolina is positioned to lead and deliver and have tremendous impact on the state of North Carolina." This well aligns with what then-Governor Pat McCrory emphasized earlier in the day, with the, "need to commercialize research efforts at our universities." The emphasis on commercial value and economic impact can also be traced to their diversity efforts, specifically with the phrase of "inclusive excellence." Inclusive excellence, as defined by the Board, "operates from the premise that diversity and inclusion are woven into the fabric of the institution and are essential to an institution achieving excellence and success and realizing the educational benefits of diversity." While this definition both necessitates inclusion to the university's "best interests," it also names diversity as a commodity to gain.

What is most interesting about the board's framing of "Carolina's best interest" is the ambiguity of the statement. Prior to the 26 March 2015 board meeting, many of the campus Black student activists and allied student groups held protests and demonstrations regarding the namesake of Saunders Hall, whose numerous roles and positions included previously serving as the Head of the Clan of the North Carolina KKK chapter. The conversation about the university's "best interests" to potentially rename Saunders Hall was framed in how to preserve university history rather than the specific concerns outlined by students (such as feeling alienated by this building name). The May 2015 vote to ultimately rename Saunders Hall was successful, only after the explicit record of Saunder's KKK activities, as then-board vice chair Garner outlined from the original 1920 recommendation. What is illuminating here is that the tipping point was not the student activism and their concerns, but rather the explicit connection between KKK and the university's history. For BOT members like Trustee Clay and Secretary Shuping-Russell, this detail proved to be a "game changer for everyone." In doing so, this aligns with a longstanding concern about not being on the wrong side of history, another reference to maintaining their reputation for "Carolina's best interests." This language was seen again throughout the continued series of student protests and emergency meetings related to the 2017 and 2018 student protests regarding Silent Sam. The utilization of right versus wrong for how the university addresses its history, while seemingly tied to racial justice, is still rooted in racial evasiveness given the terms' abilities to be interpreted regardless of racism and racial progress.

5.5. *Board Priorities through Structure and Policy*

Within a larger scope of structure, both UVA and UNC Chapel Hill had designated committees related to diversity. However, UVA's Board of Visitors absorbed the committee into its larger Board of Visitors role in the beginning of August 2016. The board maintained this decision and stated in 2017, following student concerns to reinstate a diversity committee, with then-Rector Conner explaining that, "diversity and inclusion [should] be the responsibility of the entire Board and not just assigned to one committee." Yet, when taking a closer look at this absorption and restructuring, the question remains whether diversity and inclusion is a priority when dispersed as everyone's commitment.

From September 2015 to 2016, conversations regarding race and racial diversity appeared in each of the 7 board meetings, as well as related committee meetings, which

encompassed 22 documents. In comparison, for the two years that followed, from September 2016 to December 2018, the topic of race was discussed 8 times, within the 44 documents spanning the 14 regular board meetings and additional committee meetings. More specifically, of the 8 instances, two were related to the Dean's working group and their reporting out of progress, not from the Board of Visitors. The more than 50 percent decrease in the board's conversations regarding racial diversity suggests that the August 2016 decision to absorb diversity efforts, might be more aptly described as a dissolving diversity efforts. Yet, when asked about the progress during one of the 2017 board meetings, Connor described how, "contrary to what some people believe, the University is making remarkable progress on diversity, and is putting substantial resources into increasing diversity. It has been the highest priority over the last three to four years."

Board structures reinforce university priorities with not only the types of committees that they have created, but also the ways that they structure their meetings. Both UVA and UNC Chapel Hill student newspapers have commented on the lack of access to their respective board meetings. UVA students in particular, have protested about the inability to protest at their board meetings, citing that it is a system to shut out their voices. This is even more compounded in the types of policies that boards can approve. For example, the 2015 decision from the UNC Chapel Hill Board of Trustees to rename Saunders Hall to Carolina Hall (which went against students' demands for it to be renamed to Zora Neale Hurston Hall), also included a 16-year moratorium that would prevent the renaming of buildings. While this policy was revoked in 2020, this type of policy making can dramatically impact the agency of student activists and their demands.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

Much of our findings reiterate the existing scholarship regarding boards, particularly the power that they hold in determining the priorities of the institution. The prioritization of concerns is also what most clearly maps back to the Institutional Response Framework and illuminates the prevalence of interest-convergence. In this section, we first discuss how findings relate back to the theoretical framework, then nuancing implications especially given different institutional types of governance board compositions, and concluding with recommendations.

6.1. Mapping Back to Theory

The dominant theoretical lens for this study was the Institutional Response Framework [5], with additional concepts drawn from the theory of racialized organizations [18], institutionalized racism [19], and interest convergence [16]. Within the results, the aspect of racial evasiveness was seen not only in the construction of words like "success" and "best interests," but also in the very construction of the committees and subcommittees themselves. As seen through UVA, having a specific committee focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion is critical is offering accountability as well as a point of contact. As such, using language that "diversity is everyone's responsibility" *sounds* like a sharing of power but in fact, *remains* a buffering against racial justice by more easily maintaining the status quo. Neutral terminology of "everyone" ignores the racialized differences in policy, structure, and labor within what is known as a racialized organization [18].

As racialized organizations, governance boards hold power in the types of policies they determine; as seen within UNCCH, creating a moratorium on building names has longstanding ramifications of what can even be, proverbially, brought to the table for discussion. A 16-year moratorium is not just an arbitrary number; for a university like UNCCH which typically have four-year graduation rates, 16 years roughly translates to four cycles of students—meaning that the original protesters or student activists who were hypothetically first-year students would no longer be at the university. This, within the Institutional Response Framework, not only demonstrates a form of racial evasiveness, but also demonstrates a form of schism or distancing [6], literally by ensuring that the policy or protests cannot even be held accountable to the original protesters. While this

moratorium is no longer in place since the UNC Chapel Hill Board of Trustees redacted it in 2020, the fact that this policy is even something that is possible, is an area very necessary for future research.

As a unique contribution to existing literature, this study offers a nuanced look and use of framing and language within governance boards. In doing so, we offer an opportunity to examine what we understand as interest-convergence [16,17] and the ways that racially just decisions such as creating a consortium to study campus histories with slavery, can and are also tied to reputation and marketing. To be clear, interest-convergence is not a strategy; Bell [19] clearly denotes it as a phenomenon to explain how decision-making amongst dominant (read: white) groups. Additionally, in understanding this phenomenon, the nuanced use of language in our study illuminates how the framing of “success” and “interests” helps push more equity-oriented decisions (such as the departmentalization of African American Studies) to become the “obvious” or “right side of history” decision for boards. In doing so, arguably while these demands are being bridged or met, they are also being rebranded and reframed, to ultimately reflect a form of co-option. Given the goals of UVA students to departmentalize, this theoretical mapping back to the IRF possible suggests that partnership might not always be the end goal of student activists given the sense of urgency (with pending graduations and administrative and board turnover).

6.2. Nuancing Implications through Institutional Types and Membership

The findings of this study center on two public institutions with not only specific institutional types and affiliations to flagship identity, Southern geography, and athletics, but also with how their memberships were determined. Thus, considering implications for governance boards requires complicating the ways membership can and does differ by institutional type [27]. For example, UVA and UNCCH (and other like the University of Wisconsin education system) have members appointed by the state governor, while others, especially community colleges, are voted into their positions through general elections, like San Francisco Community College. As a result, strategies to be racially evasive, particularly when needing the support of a broad political audience, might protect governance boards—arguably buffering *them* against the demands of the state, despite frustrations from students regarding the lack of specificity and ambiguity.

As governance boards grow in cultural responsiveness and a commitment to DEI efforts [9], the determinants of membership (such as governor-appointed) impacts the ways governance boards engage with the state, which adds and extends to Bastedo’s research of placing boards as the potential activists themselves [see 10,11]. For community colleges where governance boards are determined in local elections, this offers new opportunities, particularly for practice in how success and the “best interests” of the university could be defined. The nuanced differentiation of policy agenda setting and ability by governance board type (e.g., coordinating versus governing) should be an area of further exploration, especially in states where multiple types of boards engage with one another, and especially when state policies or accreditation constrain the type of role governance boards take. For example, with community colleges, accreditation standards prohibit interference from the board in the CEO/President’s implementation and interpretation of policies. This explicit mention of separation between the board and the everyday operations in some community colleges means that board policies must detail equity goals and the specific college infrastructure it will target from the onset of their development [28]. Institutional types have a broad range of implications, whether that be policy constraints with specific roles with community colleges, or the positional precarity/privilege of flagship universities, not to mention and the implicit pressures higher education institutions face within a larger production of neoliberalism [29] and economic engines towards success.

While studying boards, what is also clear from doing this research is also examining the inter and intrapersonal dynamics with boards, especially given how the respective campus presidents/chancellors at both UVA and UNCCH stepped down by 2018. With board membership remaining overwhelmingly white [12] and male [30], questions about

equity-oriented agendas also must contend with the ways systemic oppression manifest in the relational dynamics between and amongst boards and senior administration. This is also necessary given that board members are fundamentally different from other members of the campus. With expectations with financial commitment, different forms of appointment and membership determinants, these individuals differ from not only faculty and students in their positional relationship to the campus, but also with staff and administrators as well.

In nuancing the membership of organizations, particular within the IRF, the ways that governance board members determine, in larger part, the priorities and resource allocation of organizations (see [18]) while still needing to protect brand reputation and institutional framing, suggests that their responses will likely fall closer to the “institutional control” spectrum and quadrants of schism and co-option (see [6]) compared to other campus members. Ultimately, mapping the findings back to the theoretical framework also posits Ray’s [18] argument that all organizations are racialized, including colleges and universities. To suggest otherwise would be a racially evasive approach; thus, even in utilizing non-race-specific frameworks to assess DEI efforts (which is important given that DEI encompasses many more intersection aspects), this type of analysis of framing still requires the understanding of racialization and how organizations institutionalize systemic oppression, including racism.

6.3. Recommendations and Building on the Existing Literature

In alignment with Rall et al.’s [12] framework for culturally responsive governance, boards must continue to prioritize equity through explicitly named committees, rather than obscuring through shared-labor visions that rarely work in practicality. This type of structural commitment also allows for boards to move beyond numerical assessments or benchmarks of diversity, and instead, focus on the longevity needed for invested sustainability.

Within the findings nuanced framing and utilization of language, we governance boards as a space in which inclusive and equity-oriented efforts can exist. While still deeply aligned with larger board concerns about reputation, fiduciary responsibilities, and mission, the push to make boards more equitable in their representation or purpose, is something that impacts the day-to-day facets of university life, whether that be regarding employee policies, metrics for success, or faculty promotion. Thus, having boards have an explicit commitment to equity, can, in much in the same ways of holding a specific committee within the board responsible, create more outcomes towards equity and meet the concerns of student activists. In doing so, this study offers a rich glimpse of what has been traditionally a mystery behind board decisions, and placing it within the ongoing conversations of student activism and the cyclical efforts of diversity work [2,6,31,32].

7. Conclusions

As students, faculty, staff, alumni, administrators, and even the larger public continue to contend with manifestations of campus racism and respond to concerns of injustice, boards remain central to the conversation. Even further, central in these conversations are not just what is said, but how it is said and the underlying frameworks of rationalization that ultimately impact how higher education institutions view this issue as problems or opportunities (see [33]) for more equitable environments. Governance boards, while often viewed as removed from the campus, are very much intertwined in the daily aspects of campus life, and placing them as central to ongoing conversations regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion are paramount to creating better colleges and universities.

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