

Native Americans and Board Representation

on America's Largest Foundations

This research brief examines Native American representation on the boards of directors of America's largest foundations. We find that Native Americans continue to remain invisible on the boards of directors of most U.S. foundations.

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CALL TO ACTION:

Foundations need to actively take steps to increase Native American representation on their boards of directors. The majority of large foundations with no Native American board members should work to add at least one or more Native American board members on their boards of directors.

- We find that only 7% of America's largest foundations have Native American board representation and Native Americans make up only 4/5th of 1 percent (.8%) of board of director members on America's largest foundations.

- Put another way, 93% of America's largest foundations do NOT have Native American representation on their boards of directors.

- Where there are large Native American populations, there is some evidence that foundations in these states do slightly better at Native American board representation, although Native Americans are still overall underrepresented.



Numerous studies have documented that philanthropy continues to underinvest in Native American communities and has little knowledge about Native people, their communities or current challenges. And this includes foundation staff and individuals on foundation boards of directors.¹ In addition to hiring Native Americans as leaders of foundations and their programs, there is a critical need for Native American representation on the boards of U.S. foundations.

Racial and ethnic diversity on philanthropic foundation boards matters. Board diversity influences foundation priorities. Diversity on boards allows for greater connection to the communities and issues that philanthropic institutions hope to serve and helps board and foundation colleagues learn about diverse experiences. But we know that existing research on the representation of people of color on philanthropic boards paints a troubling picture: most foundation boards remain largely controlled by older white males.



Having greater Native representation on foundation boards is imperative to help foundations learn about Native communities and remind foundation boards and staff that the inclusion of Native communities must be central to any foundation strategy. No matter a foundation's funding priorities and goals—be it through a lens of strategic, justice or reparative philanthropy and in any issue area—Native people and communities are doing work in alignment with foundation priorities. Moreover, since the wealth of most foundations has their origins in the theft and loss of Native American land and resources, inclusion of Native Americans on foundation boards is critical to ensuring Native people and communities are part of American foundations' mission and overall work. Native people have the skills, knowledge and talents to serve as directors on foundation boards.

Native people are leading businesses, community organizations, and Native nations (among many other things) and this leadership can be valuable in foundation board rooms.

Research has documented that less than half of one percent of philanthropic dollars go to supporting Native-led organizations. With this, research by First Nations has documented significant knowledge gaps in what the public and individuals who work in philanthropy know about Native Americans, American history and colonization, and the current challenges within Native communities.² Moreover, just like most Americans, people in foundations may not have ever met a Native American person and/or have had very limited interactions with Native people and communities.³ Consequently, having Native people on foundation boards is important to reversing this ongoing ignorance and invisibility within philanthropy and society at large.

There have been a few different surveys of foundations that give some baseline understanding of Native American board representation. These surveys have noted that Native people on foundation boards make up anywhere from 1%⁴ to 7%⁵ of foundation boards of directors' members. These surveys are important tools in benchmarking diversity on boards but can be limited by response bias, board turnover, etc. Nonetheless, one consistent finding of all these surveys is that foundation boards of directors remain predominantly white and male.

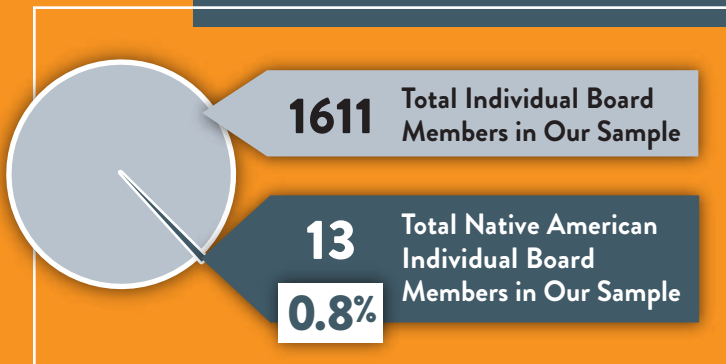
Building on these existing studies, First Nations was interested in understanding Native American representation on the boards of directors of America's largest foundations. In our sample of 158 large foundations, only 7% of these foundations have any Native American representation on their boards of directors and Native American people make up roughly .8% of foundation board members. See Data Collection section for more on foundations included in our study and our methodology for identifying Native American board members.

FINDINGS:

There is an extreme lack of Native American representation on the Boards of Directors of large foundations

OUR SAMPLE

158 US Foundations
\$556,480,882,503 Total Assets
\$38,548,590,772 Total Grantmaking



Percent of Foundations with No Native Board Representation **93%**

Percent of Foundations with Native Board Representation **7%**

DATA COLLECTION:

Who is Included in this Study

We were interested in understanding the number of Native American people serving on the boards of America's largest foundations. To identify Native American people on foundation boards we reviewed the biographies of foundation board members who serve on the boards of directors of the largest American foundations.

How did we curate a list of large foundations to examine? We pulled a list of the largest 100 foundations by asset size and by total giving as documented in the Candid Foundation Directory. In addition to these foundations, we also included in our sample the largest five foundations from the top five states where Native Americans live (Arizona, Texas, California, New Mexico and Oklahoma). According to the U.S. census, over 50% of self-identified Native Americans live in these five states.⁶ We assumed that in these states, foundations would be more likely to have Native American board members.

With this list of America's largest foundations, we searched each foundation's website for their board lists and biographies. On the foundation's websites, we searched for any mention of being Native American or working for a Native American organization, tribe, Native business, etc. If a director identified working with a Native American organization, tribe, or business, etc., but did not mention that they were a Native American tribal citizen, we did additional research on the individual to try and determine if they were a tribal citizen. Because the sample of Native Americans serving on foundation boards is small, determining status was relatively easy with publicly available information.⁷

When a foundation website only contained a board of director member list and no biographies, we conducted an internet search, searching board members' names, reviewing LinkedIn profiles, and reviewing other available public information. In these Google searches, we also searched names combined with terms like Native American, Indigenous and Tribe. For common names, we searched names and locality, and the combinations noted above.

A surprising number of large U.S. foundations do not have websites or may not list their board members. For these foundations in our sample, we looked at the most current Form 990 (Part VII) to identify board members and followed similar search criteria outlined above. At the time of this research, 2022 was the most updated Form 990 available.⁸

Based on the criteria described, our full sample contained 158 foundations with assets totaling over \$556 billion and granting over \$38.5 billion. We identified a total of 1,611 individuals serving on these foundation boards. Of these individual board members, we were able to identify 13 individuals who self-identified as Native American. **In total, only 4/5 of 1 percent (.8%) of foundation board members are Native American, making Native people grossly underrepresented on the boards of America's largest foundations.**

Turning our attention to foundations as organizations, **only 7% of foundations in our sample had a Native American board member.** Of the 11 foundations that had a Native American board member, nine of these foundations had one singular Native American board member and two foundations had two Native American board members.



Native American Board Representation on Large Foundations in States with Large Native American Populations

As part of our analysis, we were interested in learning if the top five foundations (by asset and grantmaking) in states where Native Americans make up a significant portion of the overall state population did better at Native American board representation. We looked at board representation of the top five foundations in the following five states: Oklahoma (Native Americans are 14.2% of the state population), Arizona (Native Americans are 12.9% of the state population), California (Native Americans are 9.9% of the state population), New Mexico (Native Americans are 9.1% of the state population) and Texas (Native Americans are 4.8% of the state population). We selected these five states because, according to the U.S. Census, over half of the Native American population live in these five states. Previous research by First Nations has documented that community foundations in states with a large Native American population and with larger Native American land holdings do not significantly support Native Americans through their grantmaking.⁹

Do the top five foundations in states with large Native American populations do better at Native American board of director representation compared to other national foundations?

Slightly. Foundations in states where there are large Native American populations do marginally better at Native American board representation compared to large national foundations. But representation of Native Americans on boards of directors in these states is still very low.

Based on our selection criteria, we identified a total of 38 foundations that represent the top foundations by asset size and grantmaking located in the five states with the largest Native American populations.

We identified 394 individuals who serve as directors on these foundation boards and found there are only seven Native American board members who serve on these foundation boards. Among top foundations in states with a significant Native American population, Native American people make up only about 1.7% of foundation board members. These seven Native American board members serve on the boards of six foundations. Eighty-four percent of large foundations in states that have a significant Native American population have no Native American board representation.

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE:

The U.S. Foundations in our study that have Native American representation on their boards include the following: Robert Wood Johnson, Communities Foundation of Oklahoma, Seattle Foundation, Tulsa Community Foundation, Colorado Health Foundation, Oklahoma City Community Foundation, Santa Fe Community Foundation, Casey Family Programs and Albuquerque Community Foundation. There are also other foundations that are not on the list of top 100 foundations (in assets or grantmaking) that also have Native American board representation including Northwest Area Foundation, Henry Luce Foundation, Inatai Foundation, Marguerite Casey Foundation and many others. But overall, Native people are still underrepresented on the boards of U.S. foundations overall. Foundations looking to be more diverse and inclusive of Native people can learn from these foundations and others not listed.

Northwest Area Foundation

The Northwest Area Foundation has acknowledged that the wealth of their region is fundamentally rooted in histories that dispossessed Native people of their land and resources.¹⁰ Since 2012, the Foundation has committed to award 40% of their new grants to Native-led nonprofits—a commitment that has been led by both the Foundation’s staff and board.¹¹ With this, the Foundation has long been an advocate inside philanthropy working to encourage other foundations to increase philanthropic investments to Native American-led organizations. This is because the best available data on giving to Native communities highlights that less than .03% of philanthropic dollars go to support Native-led organizations.

Today, five of the Foundation’s 14 board members are Native American. Kevin Walker, CEO and President of Northwest Area Foundation, often writes about his journey—working in partnership with his board and staff—to prioritize Native peoples, their expertise, visions, knowledge and leadership—both in Native communities and on his staff and board of directors. In his 2019 *Nonprofit Quarterly* article, “How to seek, find, and engage Native American staff and board members,” he uplifts the following as helpful tips to advance Native representation on foundation boards:¹²



Look for board and staff members with lived experience in the communities you wish to serve.

If you don’t have a sufficient web of relationships in those communities to source good board or staff candidates, that’s a problem. Own the problem and address it by building those relationships.

Foster an environment where every voice is heard and respected.

Do diverse members of your board and staff often express a sense of not being listened to? Do they at times withdraw into silence? Is their turnover rate higher than it is for board and staff members of majority communities? If so, those are signs that your organizational culture may be the problem. Own that problem and work on it. You’ll know you’re making progress and driving change when the diverse communities you’re trying to reach are giving positive feedback.

As an organizational leader, position yourself as a learner rather than an expert.

It’s no coincidence that my first two bulleted items require perceiving your organization’s weaknesses and committing to improvement. If there is a “secret sauce” in all of this, that’s it. Come to your work in a mindset of inquiry, recognizing that we are all flawed and incomplete leaders—works in progress. Think of learning, not mastery, as your most valuable core competency.

Walker notes, that “these concepts are imperative if the historically elite field of philanthropy wishes to remain relevant in the decades ahead. The time is long past due for Native people to be seen and valued by philanthropy, the nonprofit sector, and the broader society.”¹³



A CALL TO ACTION FOR FOUNDATIONS: Increase Native American Board Representation

The data in this research brief, as well as other research on board diversity, documents that Native Americans are significantly underrepresented on the boards of directors of American foundations. This trend must change—foundations must have more Native Americans on their boards. Not only must Native Americans be added to foundation boards of directors, but also their perspectives, experiences and knowledge must be proactively valued on foundation boards. In other words, representation is necessary but not sufficient. Foundations must include Native American people who can bring with them their diverse talents and experiences as well as knowledge and perspectives of Native American people and communities who live under conditions of settler colonialism. Without this type of intentional inclusion, Native people and their voices and perspectives as First Peoples will continue to be invisible and intentionally excluded from American foundations.

- 1 First Nations Development Institute. “Growing Inequity: Large foundation giving to Native American organizations and causes: 2006-2014.” <https://www.firstnations.org/publications/growing-inequity-large-foundation-giving-to-native-american-organizations-and-causes-2006-2014/>.
- 2 First Nations Development Institute and Frontline Solutions. 2018. Perspectives on philanthropy’s underfunding of Native communities and causes. https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/publication-attachments/We%20Need%20to%20Change%20How%20We%20Think_Compressed.pdf.
- 3 First Nations Development Institute and Echohawk Consulting. 2018. Reclaiming Native Truth. <https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/FullFindingsReport-screen.pdf>.
- 4 BoardSource. 2021. Leading with Intent: Reviewing the State of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion on Nonprofit Boards. <https://leadingwithintent.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021-Leading-with-Intent-DEI-Report.pdf?hsCtaTracking=6fea211c-bd59-41a5-bfec-19e4a5e97ee4%7Cbb4b1792-83d8-4942-a949-3794a8ad5554>.
- 5 Change Philanthropy. 2022. “Native American & Indigenous People in Philanthropy.” CHANGE Philanthropy. <https://changephilanthropy.org/dapp/the-2022-dapp/community-snapshot-infographics/native-in-philanthropy/>.
- 6 US Census Bureau. 2023. “A look at the largest American Indian and Alaska native tribes and villages in the nation, tribal areas and states.” Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-aian-population.html>.
- 7 For example, one individual board member was not a tribal citizen but worked for the state government on water settlements with (or against tribes). This individual was not counted as Native American.
- 8 This is a sample of national and place-based foundations and may not be entirely generalizable to the entire philanthropic sector.
- 9 First Nations Development Institute. 2018. Community Foundation Giving to Native American Causes. Longmont, CO: First Nations Development Institute. <https://www.firstnations.org/publications/community-foundation-giving-to-native-american-causes/>
- 10 Northwest Area Foundation. 2024. “Advancing economic opportunity for Native American communities.” NWAf.org. <https://www.nwaf.org/approach/native-led-work/>.
- 11 Northwest Area Foundation. 2023. “Why 40 percent of our grants go to Native-led groups.” <https://www.nwaf.org/2021/04/06/why-40-percent-of-our-grants-go-to-native-led-groups/>.
- 12 Walker, Kevin. 2021. “How to seek, find, and engage Native American staff and board member.” Nonprofit Quarterly. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-to-seek-find-and-engage-native-american-staff-and-board-members/>.
- 13 Walker, Kevin. 2021. “How to seek, find, and engage Native American staff and board members.” Nonprofit Quarterly. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-to-seek-find-and-engage-native-american-staff-and-board-members/>

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