

# Understanding the Meaning of Diversity in a Nonprofit Organization

By

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\* The author wishes to acknowledge the generous support of the William Diaz family, Robert Long at the Kellogg Foundation, and the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council for making funding for this project available through the William Diaz Fellowships. Additional thanks to those who have provided valuable input for this project, including: participating CEOs and staff at Girl Scout Councils in New Mexico and W. Texas; Paul F. Salipante, Jr.; and members of the Southwest & Border Regions Health, Education, Culture & Development Research Cluster at New Mexico State University.

## INTRODUCTION

The need to address issues of diversity in U.S. nonprofit organizations is clear. The U.S. Census 2000 indicates that about one-quarter of the U.S population identified as non-white (by race), and that nearly 13% self-identified as Hispanic (of any race)<sup>1</sup> (U.S. Census, 2000). Further, cultural self-identifications in the census overlap because respondents were able to select more than one race. These demographic changes signify the need to better address issues of diversity in nonprofit organizations (NPOs), beginning with representational diversity. While major American nonprofit organizations have greatly assisted communities of color in the U.S., and have increased their racial and ethnic composition, their boards, executives and staff remain largely white (O'Neill, 2002, p.231). In fact, Rogers & Smith (1994) found that only 14.3% of nonprofit managers were minorities, and of the managers with some graduate education, 12.5% were people of color. Although race and ethnicity are not the only dimensions of representational diversity, “[i]n diverse societies, race, and race-like ethnicity create the most stark divides” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin’ & Cook, 2001, p. 429).

There exists a wealth of research and resources related to cultural diversity in philanthropy (c.f. Hall-Russell & Kasberg (1997), Rogers (2001) and Smith, Shue, Vest & Villareal (1999), along with the work of Michael Cortés (1991, 1999), Emmett Carson (1993, 1994) and others). The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University catalogues research on diversity in giving and volunteerism, and several prominent organizations such as the National Center on Black Philanthropy, Native Americans in Philanthropy, and Hispanics in Philanthropy exist to support these communities’ philanthropic efforts.

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<sup>1</sup>For census data collection purposes, the federal government considers race and Hispanic origin to be two separate and distinct concepts (Greico & Cassidy, 2001, p.1).

However, in the nonprofit management area, diversity research has developed fairly recently. Much of this research has focused on board composition and governance issues (c.f. Brown, 2002; Duca, 1996; Siciliano, 1996; Widmer, 1987). Very few studies have focused on diversity among staff and volunteers, nor on issues of diversity that move beyond representational demographics and composition.

Because the systematic study of diversity in the nonprofit domain is at a nascent stage (Weisinger & Salipante, 2005), field research is particularly appropriate for exploring some of the related issues and challenges in NPOs. This paper represents one step towards a better understanding of diversity in nonprofit organizations. Within the context of the focal organization, the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. (GSUSA, or GS in this paper), this project explores NPO staff members' understandings of diversity and the challenges they face when reaching out to underserved groups to increase organizational membership.

### THE FIELD CASE

In ongoing research involving GSUSA, the case has been made as to why this organization represents a good case for the study of diversity and pluralism issues (Weisinger & Salipante, 2005). In sum, GSUSA has had an ongoing and explicitly articulated commitment to diversity and pluralism for several decades. Its mission, which until recently was summarized by the phrase "serving every girl, everywhere" emphasized developing all girls by serving previously underserved ethnic and class populations. This national initiative initially led to significant increases in minority membership. Further, as an organization supported primarily by volunteers, it recognizes the importance of the *relational* aspect of a diverse membership. Thus, an organization that has been publicly lauded by management guru Peter Drucker (Sullivan,

2005) as a model organization, and that has had a significant commitment to diversity should magnify and expose the types of inclusion problems faced by other NPOs, and in the broader society. Finally, GSUSA's values, including service, respect, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and citizenship require overcoming these diversity issues and serve as internal resources for advancing pluralism.

The field study sample included three local GS councils in the Southwest U.S.: Girl Scouts of the Rio Grande, Inc. (El Paso, Texas), Girl Scouts of Chaparral Council, Inc. (Albuquerque, New Mexico), and Girl Scouts of the Sangre de Cristo Council, Inc. (Santa Fe, New Mexico). The three participating councils serve some 15,000 girl members, with the help of over 7,000 adult volunteers, covering 25 counties in west Texas, New Mexico, and southwestern Colorado.

### Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on-site with 33 staff members across the three councils. Interview data were content analyzed using a standard qualitative analysis software package. The field research began in October 2004. Initial meetings were held with CEOs to gather background information on each Council and on the diversity issues facing it. Council CEOs were instrumental in facilitating access to staff for the on-site interviews. From November 2004 through March 2005, on-site interviews were conducted in several rounds. Most staff members were interviewed twice, with interviews averaging about 40 minutes. A total of 52 interviews were conducted.

Based upon an ongoing stream of research related to diversity and social capital in nonprofit organizations (Weisinger & Salipante, 2005), the interview schedule focused on five

sets of questions related to: (a) interviewee background, (b) views of diversity in the organization, (c) mission, core values and practices as related to diversity, (d) challenges in achieving diversity, and (e) the role that staff's social networks play in diversity efforts. However, this paper focuses on the views and understandings of diversity, as well as diversity challenges facing council staff.

## WHAT DOES DIVERSITY MEAN?

Research on the management of diversity has reflected various demographic characteristics such as race, gender, age, culture, national origin, religion, and physical abilities. Some of this research has covered topics such as diversity in groups and teams (c.f., Cox, Lobel & McLeod, 1991; Jackson, Joshi & Ernhardt, 2003). Recently, the Diversity Research Network has investigated the impact of diversity on organizational performance (Kochan, Bezrukova, Ely, Jackson, Joshi, Jehn, Leonard, Levine, & Thomas, 2003). Rarer are studies examining the benefits of this diversity in terms of how diversity actually affects the way organizations do their work (Thomas and Ely, 1996). At basis, when many researchers and practitioners talk about diversity in organizations, they are typically talking about representational demographic characteristics of the workforce.

Diversity is variously defined in the management literature. Cox (1994) references “cultural diversity” in organizations, which reflects the “representation” of people with distinctive group affiliations, such as race, gender, religion, and even personality and political party affiliation (1994, p. 246). Thomas (1990) defines “managing diversity” simply as facilitating interactions among diverse members to achieve organizational effectiveness. Ivancevich & Gilbert (2000) define the management of diversity as the organization's commitment to “recruit, retain, reward and promote a heterogeneous mix of productive,

motivated and committed workers” with the mix referring to race/ethnicity, gender, and physical abilities (p. 77). Thus, beyond the broadest understanding of diversity as reflecting differences among people, researchers continue to define the term somewhat differently. Within the nonprofit sector, many of the contemporary studies of organizational diversity have focused on board composition (c.f., Brown, 2002; Duca, 1996; Gitin, 2001; Nichols, 1993; Rutledge, 1994; Siciliano, 1996; Widmer, 1987), nonprofit management practice (Knowlton, 2001), and diversity and human capital (Gajewski, 2005).

Thus, organizational research related to diversity focuses primarily on diversity as the representation of various demographic differences among organizational members. Several researchers have suggested frameworks for organizations moving from more traditional “equal employment opportunity” approaches to diversity, towards more inclusive approaches that consider the value added of that diversity to organizational effectiveness (Brown, 2002; Cox, 1991; Thomas, 1990; Thomas & Ely, 1996). However, few studies have examined exactly how organizations have gone about including the diverse worldviews of members into the organization—a more inclusive, or pluralistic approach.

But before undertaking an examination of how an organization can become more inclusive, it is important to gauge what diversity and pluralism mean to those charged with achieving both. The Girls Scouts organization is an instructive case with respect to diversity and pluralism. The national organization, in its training materials, distinguishes between “diversity” and “pluralism.” Diversity refers to the numbers of members from various racial and ethnic groups, and pluralism refers to the inclusion of these members’ diverse views into the organization, reflecting a process of building mutually respectful relationships. The Girl Scouts has demonstrated a long-standing national commitment to diversity, dating back several decades

now. However, many local councils continue to struggle with recruiting and retaining girl and adult members from underserved groups. If diversity is indeed a key strategic organizational objective, then it is important to understand how those who are implementing this strategy, at the local council level, understand what diversity means, and whether this understanding accords with that of the national leadership.

### Local Meanings of Diversity

In this study, participants were asked, “When people use the term ‘diversity’ within your council, what do you think they are referring to?” As reported in a separate paper (Weisinger, Salipante, & Goggans, 2005), interviewees across the three councils in this study had slightly different views about what the term meant. A predominant view across councils was that diversity referred to race, ethnicity, and/or color. More specifically, in one council over half of those interviewed thought that when the term diversity was used within their council people were referring to specifically to ‘Hispanics’:

*I would say they [GSUSA] are really diverse, because they are--they mean, well, everybody. And I think here [at my council], when they say diversity, I think it definitely means Hispanics. {ABQ}*

In a different council, over half indicated that the term diversity simply referred to individuals being different. Thus, meanings of diversity varied within and across councils, though in most cases, those views related to demographic characteristics. One interviewee put it this way:

*I think it means very different things to different people. For some people, it means a numerical statement about a population we’re serving. For others, it means looking for a wide variety of opinions or perspectives on certain topics. For others, it might mean, you know, breaking people into certain groups or categories. So I think it depends on the individual.*

Although several interviewees also mentioned other characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and physical abilities, race and ethnicity were predominant. Generally speaking, these local staff members' views of the meaning of diversity were consistent with the usage of the term "diversity" at the national level, defined by the degree to which membership reflects various underrepresented populations. One reason race and ethnicity would be predominant has to do with the categories used to reflect underrepresented groups. Since the organization's definition of diversity, and its metrics tracking diversity, are aligned with U.S. census designations, staff views of "diversity" might be expected to focus mostly on race and ethnicity.

Interestingly, the council where interviewees believed that the term referred specifically to Hispanics is in Albuquerque, where nearly 70% of the population is Anglo, and 40% also identify as Hispanic. (For the U.S. Census, "Hispanic" is not a racial designation, but rather an ethnic one; thus, people may identify Hispanics of any race(s).) The African-American, Asian, and Native American populations in the metropolitan area constitute less than 10% combined.) For this council, the untapped diverse membership "market" is clearly Hispanic, though the council also does outreach to other communities of color. In contrast, the other council where half of interviewees said that diversity simply referred to the state of being different is in El Paso, a metropolitan area where some 75% of the population identifies as Hispanic (or Latino), and about 18% as Anglo (non-Hispanic).

Age diversity was an interesting issue that was broached in several interviews at all three councils. Many of the younger, most recently hired staff members across all three councils have no history with the Girl Scouts-- either as GS parents or volunteers, or even as a Girl Scout themselves. For these younger staff, there was definitely a "learning process," as one interviewee

said, for them to get to know the Girl Scout's ways, language and culture. This is because much of the GS 'ways' reflects tacit knowledge—a lot is simply understood by those who have had a long-time affiliation with the organization. In fact, when asked how they ended up working at their council, the responses of many of the younger staff indicated that they were looking foremost for a suitable job, rather than for a job with the Girl Scouts per se. However, in terms of commitment to mission, nearly all of them said that they were also in it 'for the girls,' or that they thought very highly of the concept of Girl Scouting.

In sum, most of these views of diversity at the local councils reflect an emphasis on increasing the representation among various groups--providing opportunities for individuals from underserved populations to join the GS. This is consistent with the national organization's definition of diversity as essentially "counting people" from underrepresented groups.

### Diversity vs. Pluralism

Since GSUSA makes an explicit distinction between diversity and pluralism, interviewees were asked if they knew the difference. Interestingly, only three staff members interviewed could articulate specifically the difference between diversity and pluralism that is espoused in the organization's training materials. This indicates a primary emphasis on representational diversity, at least in the councils in this sample. Clearly, one reason for this is that the metrics used to track how well the organization is meeting its diversity goals involve "counting" this representation from the various groups of interest. However, even groups that might be considered "diverse" may not actually get counted and tracked. For example, one staff member who is a Muslim and whose community consists of many people who have emigrated to the U.S., started a troop at the local mosque. While many would agree that this troop (the girls as

well as the adult volunteers leading it, who also get tracked) added to the representational diversity within this council, these girl and adult members did not actually “count” because they did not fit the standard categories reflecting underrepresented minorities in the U.S.

The lack of explicit recognition of the differences between diversity and pluralism begs the question as to whether local staff are simply not sensitive to the espoused differences between diversity and pluralism (which has several implications to be discussed later), or whether they express that difference in more subtle ways. Consider this interviewee’s response to a question on whether staff meanings of ‘diversity’ within her council are consistent with the GSUSA’s national view:

*I'm not sure I can speak exactly for them, but I think they probably mean attracting girls and adults from specific populations. I hope they mean looking for a wide variety of perspectives and life experiences among our volunteers and girls.*

In response to the same question, another interviewee in the same council said:

*This isn't based on any specific information that I've gotten. I think it's more based on just materials that I see coming out from GSUSA. How do I explain it? I'm not sure that--it's more specific to different ethnic populations, the information that's coming out, and not necessarily an overall approach on individualism.*

These staff members seem to acknowledge the difference between attracting and counting a diverse representation from specific groups versus incorporating their diverse perspectives into the organization. A number of other interviewees also alluded to such a difference. Thus, while the explicit ideal of pluralism that is espoused by the GS organization is not readily articulated by local staff, at some level there is recognition of the difference.

One staff executive suggested that diversity is actually a preferable term to pluralism:

*I would use diversity, personally, because I think diversity explains where we're trying to go or what we're trying to say much better than pluralism. And I don't think most people would understand pluralism, but most generally everybody understands diversity.... Because also when you say diversity, you're talking about not just individuals in terms of national origin, but you can talk about diversity in saying that a girl that has some kind of physical disability is part of our diversity in terms of serving girls.*

Again, this is representative of a focus on representational diversity, though this interviewee sees such diversity as being beyond race and ethnicity.

Even if one considers representational diversity primarily in terms of race and ethnicity, the issue of multiple identities and different intraethnic identities will affect both diversity and pluralism efforts.

#### Diversity within Diversity

*GSUSA has just put out a new poster that's supposed to be addressing the Asian culture, and they lumped it all together. And [people are] saying, you know, this poster is very offensive, because you can't call a Korean and a Vietnamese and a Chinese and Indian and a Japanese all the same thing, [but]you have on this poster.*

This particular poster was mentioned in a couple of different interviews. It reflects an underlying issue that makes traditional notions of representational diversity outmoded--that is, the diversity within the racial and ethnic groups that compose the underserved populations that the organization is targeting. For example, in the Southwest U.S, what does it really mean to target 'Hispanics' (the locally accepted term)? In New Mexico and west Texas, Hispanic can mean many things: people of Spanish ancestry whose family lineage pre-dates the birth of the United States-- some of whom may be bilingual, others who speak only English; recent Mexican immigrants, most of whom speak Spanish, and may speak some English; second or third

generation descents of Mexican immigrants who may called themselves ‘Mexican American’ or simply Hispanic (or Latino or Chicano), and who speak both Spanish and English, and often only English; or perhaps people from other Latin American counties. As long as individuals identify themselves as at least being part Hispanic on the GS enrollment form, they will be counted as Hispanic. However, this racioethnic identification process is not clear cut, particularly when it comes to troop (girl) membership enrollments. Many interviewees at this council (and staff at other councils the author has worked with in the past) say that when the race and ethnicity boxes are not checked off by the parent or guardian, the adult volunteer leading the troop “eyeballs” the girls in question and makes a determination as to race or ethnicity. Other staff have said that the way people self-identify varies widely. For instance, a Hispanic person may select white as their race, but not identify their ethnicity.

Recognizing that there are politics around cultural identification in the U.S. that have real economic and political consequences for underrepresented groups, the real question being raised here is whether an overemphasis on representational diversity diminishes the organization’s capacity to develop pluralistic diversity, which in fact involves transcending demographic, representational differences (Weisinger, Salipante & Goggans, 2005):

*[ I ] do think that we’re diverse. I don’t think anyone can really understand what it’s like to live here in El Paso and to experience, you know, living here unless they’ve actually lived here or been in this area for awhile. So they [GSUSA] might see us a little different, you know, but I don’t think that they fully understand what it’s like to actually live there. No, I think they have the same ideas as far as what diversity is, being different and eclectic and, you know--I mean, all those different cultures and subcultures mixing and working together and, you know, diversity promotes creativity and promotes other ethnic, racial villages, groups, to kind of all come together. I think GSUSA really does recognize that, and they kind of tailor the program to it. I think they know what it’s all about.*

## DIVERSITY & ITS CHALLENGES

Not only can diversity mean different things within and across councils in a region, it may also pose different types of recruitment and retention challenges, depending upon location. For example, in the desert Southwest, the types of challenges staff face in recruiting new members from underserved groups (in these councils, predominantly Hispanics and Native Americans, and African-Americans to a lesser degree) involve issues such as transportation, distance, culture, language and costs. Regarding costs, one interviewee mentioned that even the minimal \$10 membership fee can cost prohibitive for some of the poverty-stricken families living in this region (though the fee is frequently subsidized by the council). Poverty is widespread in this region of the U.S. For example, despite its scenic beauty, New Mexico ranks as one of the poorest states in the U.S. Nearly 24% of Hispanics, 36% of Native Americans, and 23% of African-Americans fall below the federal poverty threshold, as compared to 9% of Anglos (Sierra, 2003).

The participating councils in this project also serve vast geographic areas, including significant numbers of rural areas and small towns, and in El Paso, many *colonias*, or poor, primarily Mexican settlements along the U.S. – Mexico border. Thus, transportation can be a significant barrier. It may take a staff member over an hour to reach some of the *colonias*. With respect to serving rural areas, one interviewee noted that the way the information about the Girl Scouts was provided to a particular school was through staff dropping off information at the school, to which very few responded, particularly for a traditional troop that would likely require them to do a significant amount of additional driving:

*“And [in] the rural areas, if parents work, they usually have to drive a long distance to get to work. And they get home, they have to make dinner, they have to deal with their kids and homework. They don’t want to be going, driving another half hour to get somewhere to take their daughters to register for Girl Scouts.”*

Not only is distance an issue, but for many prospective members who cannot afford their own means of transportation and who are in areas not serviced by public transportation, getting to GS events can be very problematic.

The Southwest councils, particularly those in New Mexico, also have different types of challenges in bringing Girl Scouting to Native American nations and tribes, and to Mexican and Mexican-American populations. For example, with respect to Native Americans:

*I notice just basic differences like in celebrations. Pueblo Indians have feast days; the Navajo Nation doesn't. Now, that doesn't really affect how I interact with them, but it's a noticeable difference. It does affect when I'm able to interact with them though, because of the timing when you can do things and when you can't.*

### Recruitment Challenges

One of the interview questions asked staff members whether or not they felt they needed to adapt any traditional Girl Scout practices in order to more effectively reach underserved communities. Answers to this question were mixed—some interviewees indicated that they did not really do anything differently in trying to attract diverse girls and adults into Girl Scouting, while others provided examples of things they actually did differently. Less explicit than adapting practices was adapting approaches to recruiting members from underserved communities:

*Now, we have found that, even within the... Mexican-based Hispanic culture-- there are three different approaches you have to take. You have your really Mexican person who might just be crossing the border, and you have to deal with them one way. You have your first generation; they're starting to adapt to the American way, sort of. They're learning them. Then you have your second or third or fourth generation. They're American. You know, they may have Hispanic blood, but they're American, and you deal with them totally different than you do with the others. So, even within a cultural group, they're different--*

*especially when immigration is involved--and I imagine that runs the same with any cultural group, when there's immigration involved.{EP}*

*I think there's a hesitance [with Hispanics]. The organization is perceived more as White. Where I don't see that as being an issue necessarily with Native Americans. And it's maybe that Native Americans are more concentrated in areas where there are lots of them and less White people. So they don't necessarily ever see the mass of White kids, for example. Whereas here, it's perceived as the White blonde kid that has a uniform and all of her little badges and everything else, and she's selling cookies, and a certain mother goes along with it. Well, the Hispanic mother doesn't necessarily identify with that image.{ABQ}*

*The second biggest issue with us is that we have six of the eight northern pueblos within our jurisdiction. And serving the Native American population is [time consuming] and it can be costly, but it's mostly time in terms of the languages and the barrier. But again, they don't have a history of girl scouting. And if anything else comes up on the pueblo that has to do with youth or the government or ceremonial day or a holiday, you know, girl scouting is like 'out the door.' {SF}*

The council in Santa Fe also serves the Apache Nation in Dulce, and Girl Scouting in this setting is actually run by someone hired by the Nation's youth department—a nontraditional Girl Scouting arrangement. One interviewee commented on difficulties serving tribal nations in part because of the degree of “secrecy” involved.

Thus, GS staff members at these local councils face significant challenges in reaching out to underserved groups. Many of these efforts take a significant amount of their time. For example, relationship-building with the families of prospective girl and adult members, particularly among many Mexican-Americans, is a prerequisite to organizational membership. It may take a staff member up to a year to develop a relationship with the family such that they (meaning the patriarch, typically) are comfortable with the girl, and/or her mother, participating in Girl Scouting. These challenges, although focused more on recruitment rather than on

retention, actually involve pluralism, as well as diversity issues. This is discussed in more detail below.

## DISCUSSION

It is tempting to suggest that diversity and pluralism be tackled sequentially. That is, organizations can first focus on diversity to increase membership from underrepresented groups, and once those numbers are substantially increased, work on pluralism to ensure adequate inclusion of all members (Weisinger & Salipante, 2005). However, the ongoing challenges that local GS councils have with attracting underrepresented girls and adults suggest that perhaps representational and pluralistic diversity should be pursued simultaneously (Weisinger, Salipante & Goggans, 2005). Enhancing pluralism should help in efforts to attract diverse new members, and attracting diverse new members provides a basis for enhanced pluralism efforts. An illustrative example from this study is provided by this interviewee:

*I think also we don't sometimes have all of the infrastructure we need to do what we say we'd like to do...[for example] ...as of six months ago, if someone was monolingual in Spanish and they called our council, they might have a difficult time accessing information.*

In this example, pluralism would involve recognizing the value of the Spanish language, and even appreciating the subtle differences between different 'types' of Spanish. (A few interviewees mentioned that different Spanish terms were sometimes used in the brochures and other materials published by GS headquarters (located in New York State) than would be used among Spanish speaking people in the Southwest. Another interviewee gave an example of a Mexican woman requesting some help in Spanish at their council office, and how the interviewee, a Spanish speaker herself, did not quite understand some words of the Spanish that

was being spoken by the visitor.) Enhancing pluralism in this sense would have helped the council to have been able to attract much earlier potential Spanish speaking Hispanic members. In fact, in at least two of the three councils studied, having Spanish-speaking staff was a relatively new event (relative to the start of the GS diversity initiative a few decades ago).

Similarly, it would be tempting to equate diversity issues with recruitment, and pluralism issues with retention. And in fact, much of the discussion in the field interviews suggest that diversity and recruitment are linked and represent a significant focus in the councils, while pluralism and retention are less prominent. However, this interviewee recognizes the importance of the latter:

*I think another piece of that puzzle is, my role really, I see in program, part of it is attracting members, but most of it is retaining members. And so that's where I see that I can be most helpful. But also part of it is our consistency, and we need to make a commitment to our community rather than organize efforts that are then not followed through on.*

This interviewee is suggesting that perhaps a longer term approach is needed for diversity and pluralism, the focus of which can be on building lasting relationships, which would benefit both diversity and pluralism. In this case, short term metrics will be inadequate in assessing whether true pluralism has been achieved within the organization.

From a social capital perspective (Putnam, 2000), these staff members are building bridging ties that can be transformed over time into bridging social capital, which can then be leveraged for both diversity and pluralism, as well as for recruitment and retention purposes. In fact, in a separate study based upon additional questionnaire data collected from these interviewees after the field interviews were completed, staff members demonstrated primarily the development and usage of bridging social capital in their jobs (Weisinger & Black, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

This study has identified some of the potential issues that voluntary NPOs face when attracting and retaining members from diverse populations. Any of these challenges can be complicated when staff members, who are charged with implementing strategic goals related to diversity, have differing views on just what diversity means. Further, if there is a disconnect between diversity concepts espoused by executive management as compared to those used by staff in the field, then effective diversity and pluralism efforts could potentially be compromised.

Furthermore, NPOs can consider tackling both diversity and pluralism issues simultaneously, rather than sequentially. An organization that is known for its inclusiveness will be able to attract diverse members, while having a critical mass of diversity allows for inclusion processes to be undertaken.

Additional research in this area might further examine internal views of diversity in other GS councils in different regions, and also in other NPOs. A cross-case comparison of local meanings of diversity versus nationally espoused meanings within comparable NPOs that have already demonstrated commitment to diversity would be highly instructive. Also, it would be worthy to examine inclusion processes in some NPOs to ascertain which types of policies, practices, and behaviors actually help to foster a more inclusiveness organizational environment. Finally, further examination of the role of social capital in diversity and pluralism efforts in NPOs would be instructive.

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