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The Benefits Case for Diversity in Nonprofits

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ABSTRACT
In this conceptual paper, I argue that there is, in nonprofits, a case comparable to the "business case" for diversity in for-profit organizations. The primary goal of nonprofits is not profit maximization, but the achievement of social benefit or the advancement of the public good through their mission. I contend that, just as there is a case that diversity benefits the goals of for-profit organizations, there is a comparable case that diversity advances the goals of nonprofits as well. We might call it the *benefits case* for diversity in nonprofits. I distinguish between direct and indirect benefits. In for-profit organizations, diversity has been shown to increase flexibility, enhance creativity and innovation, and improve decision-making and problem-solving. These direct benefits, when applied to areas such as cost control, marketing, and recruitment, lead to improved outcomes—producing indirect benefits and, ultimately greater profits. Similarly, in nonprofits, diversity generates comparable direct benefits, which translate into greater social impact through mission fulfillment. In one case, they lead to higher profitability and greater shareholder wealth; in the other, they contribute to greater social impact through mission fulfillment. The disanalogy lies in measurement: for-profit organizations have a single quantifiable metric—namely, profit—which allows for a direct correlation between diversity and organizational success. Nonprofits lack a single universal metric. However, they do have various indicators (for example, membership growth and dollars raised) that can be used to measure and track success and progress toward fulfilling their individual missions.

Keywords: diversity, benefits case for diversity, nonprofits, mission fulfillment.

THE BENEFITS CASE FOR DIVERSITY IN NONPROFITS

In this conceptual paper, I argue that there is, in nonprofits , a case comparable to the business case for diversity in for-profit organizations. The primary goal of nonprofits is not profit maximization, but the achievement of social benefit or the advancement the public good through their mission. I argue that, just as there is a case that diversity benefits the goals of for-profit organizations, there is a comparable case that diversity advances the goals of nonprofits as well. We might call it the "benefits case" for diversity in nonprofits.

Corporate focus on workplace diversity traces back to the Executive Orders of Presidents Kennedy (Order 10925, 1961) and Johnson (Order 11246, 1965), as well as to Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These measures sought to eliminate employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. Corporate executives understandably became occupied with legal compliance and ethical arguments in favor of equitable hiring and promotion policies and procedures. These arguments—emphasizing both fairness and compensatory and distributive justice— evolved into arguments for diversity, equity and inclusion, resulting in more diverse workplaces. Over time, the concept of diversity broadened to include gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity, as well as education, socioeconomic status, marital status, and other characteristics that help define a person's identity. Around this same time, scholars turned from ethical arguments for diversity in business towards business-based arguments.

The business case for diversity, simply put, is the argument that diversity is good for business. In for-profit organizations, "good for business" translates into factors that contribute to higher profitability and greater stockholder wealth. The argument, in short, is that diversity—or more accurately, a well-managed diverse workforce—yields benefits such as cost advantages, competitive advantages in resource acquisition, improved marketing success, enhanced creativity and innovation, better problem-solving ability, and greater organizational flexibility to respond to environmental changes (Cox and Blake, 1991, p. 47). To these benefits, we might also add better, more effective collaboration ("The Top Ten Benefits of Diversity in the Workplace," 2025), better decision-making (Turner & Fischoff, 2021), and improved productivity (1).

Consider, for example, the notion that diversity increases productivity. The thinking here is that "diversity is a catalyst for innovation and creativity; that diverse teams boost innovation by bringing in perspectives, insights, and new ideas to decision-making and solving new problems" (George, 2023). "This value and knowledge expand growth by adding new possibilities and helping break into new markets" (2). Diversity is thought, moreover, to expand an organization's customer base and thereby lead to greater marketing success. Hewlett et al. report that organizations with a two-dimensionally diverse leadership (i.e., having at least three traits each of both inherent and acquired diversity) "are 45% likelier to report a growth in market share over the previous year and 70% likelier to report that the firm captured a new market" (Hewlett, 2013)

Of course, the strength of the case for diversity depends both on the strength of the link between diversity and the alleged benefits, and on the link between those benefits and higher profits. The argument—or rather, the business case for diversity—is that all of these benefits, independently and collectively, make the organization more competitive and, therefore, more likely to generate higher profitability and, eo ipso, greater stockholder wealth.

A nonprofit's performance, on the other hand, is measured, not by profitability and stockholder wealth, but by mission fulfillment. The comparable case for nonprofits, therefore, must be that diversity offers certain benefits that result in better, more successful mission fulfillment. Arguably, the same benefits of diversity that lead to greater profitability in for-profits lead to more successful mission fulfillment in nonprofits.

At a high level—that is, the level which does not consider how diversity affects profitability—the business case for diversity is a statistical one, showing a direct correlation between diversity and net profits. They show, that is to say, that when diversity numbers are higher, so too are net profits.

Consider, for example, a McKinsey study reporting that an "analysis of the data collected from 366 companies disclosed a statistically significant connection between diversity and financial performance, with organizations in the top quartile for gender diversity 15 percent more likely to have financial returns above their national industry median, and companies in the top quartile for racial/ethnic diversity were 35 percent more likely to have financial returns above their national industry median" (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). This research establishes a statistically significant correlation—though not a cause—between financial results and diversity, and it looks only at the composition of "top management and board," not all company employees.

Nevertheless, at a high level, it establishes a relationship between diversity and earnings. However, at this level, a disanalogy with nonprofits becomes apparent. Nonprofits do not measure net earnings as a target goal, and there is no single variable that measures mission accomplishment across the nonprofit sector. There is nothing—no single metric, it would seem—to which we could possibly link diversity that would indicate it somehow improves mission fulfillment.

There are, however, a host of metrics that indicate a nonprofit's progress towards fulfilling its mission, and that can be correlated with the level of well-managed diversity in a particular organization. These metrics include such things as the number of people served, the number of new programs implemented, the number of visitors, dollars raised, and membership growth (Sawhill and Williamson 98).

Then, too, nonprofits may also consider metrics that are linked more directly to mission fulfillment. Goodwill Industries, for example, whose mission is to "enhance the dignity and quality of life of individuals and families by strengthening communities, eliminating barriers to opportunity, and helping people in need reach their full potential through learning and the power of work" (Cardoni, 2009, p.1), could "measure its success by counting the number of people participating in its training programs and then placed in jobs" (Sawhill &Williamson, 2001). All of these are measurable indicators of progress towards mission fulfillment, and where they can be linked to diversity, they demonstrate its impact on mission fulfillment within a particular organization.

That said, there is no disanalogy at the lower levels—the levels that tie diversity to specific benefits. Conceptually, and in some cases experimentally, it appears that the very benefits that are alleged to make for-profits more competitive and ultimately bring about higher profitability and greater stockholder wealth are the same benefits that, in nonprofits, contribute to greater social impact through mission fulfillment. In short, diversity in both for-profits and nonprofits, boosts decision-making, problem-solving, performance, creativity, and innovation. Additionally, it boosts an organization's ability to market its services, attract and retain higher quality employees, reduce costs, and enhance its flexibility to deal with environmental change.

At the lower, associated benefit level, the business case for diversity has two components and has been presented in at least three different ways. The first component seeks to link diversity to one or more benefits, while the second component links those benefits to profits and, ultimately, to increased stockholder wealth.

Sometimes, we are presented with a statistical case showing a correlation between diversity and higher profits—tied to a purported benefit, such as greater innovation. This is the case made when researchers claim "that diversity unlocks innovation and drives market growth" (Hewlett, 2013). The researchers report that companies with two-dimensional diversity out-innovate and outperform others. (Two-dimensional diversity refers to having a mix of both inherent and acquired diversity.) Employees at these companies are 45% likelier to report that their firm's market share grew over the previous year and 70% likelier to report that the firm captured a new market. (2)

Here, increased—and especially new—market share seems to be taken as equivalent to, or, at any rate as an indicator of, increased innovation, which it might not be. However, it would seem, in this instance, that companies were tracking metrics such as new product sales and gross margins, and the researchers then correlated those results with both inherent and acquired diversity. Inherent diversity "involves traits you are born with, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Acquired diversity, on the other hand, involves traits you gain from experience, such as "living in a foreign country or attending a two-year school and matriculating into a four-year university" (Csedrick, 2019).

In another study, researchers examined the correlation of diversity variables in management positions—such as gender, age, and national origin—"with the percentage of revenues coming from products introduced in the last three years, as a proxy for innovation impact" (Lorenzo & Reeves, 2018). In this study, it is more clear that innovation is being measured by and correlated with the percentage of revenue from the new products. However, once again, there appears to be no analogue in the nonprofit sector, which does not track this kind of data, as nonprofits are not oriented toward profit generation. Moreover, there is no single variable that measures mission fulfillment across the nonprofit sector.

We are left with two additional kinds of arguments at the lower level. The first is a conceptual one, suggesting that a well-managed, diverse workforce is more creative than a homogeneous one because a person's creativity is enhanced by their ability to integrate different points of view—something found among "bi-cultural individuals who were able to identify with both their home and host cultures," due to what researchers called their "greater levels of integrative complexity" (Tendayi, 2016). These bi-cultural individuals, in other words, were able to "consider and combine multiple perspectives and points of view" (1).

Moreover, aside from bicultural individuals, "diverse teams bring together individuals with varied backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives . . . and when people from different walks of life come together, they approach problems from unique angles and suggest novel solutions. This fusion of perspectives can lead to more innovative and effective problem-solving strategies" (Mark, 2023). This conceptual argument clearly requires supporting data, but if it holds true for for-profit organizations, it should hold equally true for nonprofits. Clearly, it is not the type of organization that determines the effectiveness of diverse collaboration, but rather the diversity of the individuals themselves and the nature of their interaction.

Still, at other times, the case made at the lower, associated benefit level is based on the results of a controlled laboratory experiment, often conducted in a classroom setting. Aware that large data set studies are limited to showing only a correlation—rather than a causal link—between diversity and improved performance, renowned diversity scholar Katherine W. Phillips sought to demonstrate a causal relation by focusing on decision-making in small groups.

In a famous 'murder mystery' study conducted by Phillips and her colleagues Margaret Neale of Stanford, and Gregory Northcraft of the University of Illinois (Phillips,Northcraft, & Neale, 2006), a total of 216 business school students were divided into 72 groups of three. All groups were of the same gender, but 31 were homogeneous (three Caucasian members) while 41 were diverse (two Caucasian members and one Asian, African American, or Hispanic). Each group was asked to complete a murder mystery exercise. All group members were given a common set of information (clues), but each member was also given information that only they knew. In order to solve the mystery, a group had to identify which of four suspects was the murderer. Doing so required that the individually held information be shared and integrated with the common information.

The researchers found that, overall, the diverse groups outperformed the homogeneous ones. This experiment, while not establishing a causal relation between diversity and problem-solving performance, does suggest an influence of one on the other. In particular, it has implications for those problem-solving challenges, which, like murder mysteries, require skills such as observation, active listening. logic, critical thinking, and creativity. All of these skills would help a detective find and connect the dots in a mystery.

Another study, conducted by Sheen S. Levine, David Stark, and their colleagues, was designed to confirm that university admission policies aimed at creating diverse student bodies not only improved the prospects of certain groups but also enriched the education of everyone. In this experiment, participants were divided into homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, which competed in the valuation of simulated stocks. First, individual answers were collected, and afterward the participants were allowed to trade—that is, buy and sell—those stocks using real money. During this trading period, participants could observe how others in their group were trading and adjust their valuations. Clearly, interacting with one's counterparts may bring new opinions into view, which—right or wrong—may influence one's own valuations. Strikingly, the researchers found that "when participants were in diverse company, their answers were 58 percent more accurate. The prices they chose were much closer to the true values of the stock" (Levine and Stark, 2015). Here, then, is another instance of the positive impact of diversity on performance.

Other experimental studies focus, not on problem-solving outcomes (e.g., Did the group correctly identify the murderer? or Did the group perform better at valuing the stocks?), but on the deliberation process itself. Notably Samuel Sommers, of Tufts University conducted an experiment in a mock jury context, "designed to show the extent of influence of racial composition on group decision-making" (Sommers, 2006). Sommers was interested, not in the verdicts rendered by the study's homogeneous and heterogeneous groups per se, but in the nature of their deliberations and their responses to both a pre-deliberation voir dire questionnaire—one version race-neutral and the other race-relevant, designed to heighten participants' awareness of race in the trial—and a separate pre-deliberation questionnaire that asked about their opinions regarding the defendant's guilt or innocence.

Sommers recruited 200 participants for his experiment and divided them into homogeneous (all White) and heterogeneous (four White and two Black) groups of six, with alternates assigned to most groups. Once the mock juries were created, participants were seated at a rectangular table, which allowed them to see one another, and become aware of the composition of their group. After administering the voir dire questionnaires to all groups of jurors, the jurors were polled individually to determine whether they thought the defendant was guilty before deliberations began. All groups then watched a video summary of the trial and, afterward, completed a two-item pre-deliberation questionnaire. The questionnaire first asked for their verdict preference, and then for a quantification of the likelihood that the defendant had committed the crime. The jury then deliberated for sixty minutes about the guilt or innocence of a Black defendant charged with sexual assault of White victims.

Sommers found that whereas 47 percent of the participants who completed the race-neutral voir dire questionnaire said the defendant was guilty before deliberations, only 34 percent of those who received the race-relevant questionnaire did so. Furthermore, whereas roughly 50 percent of those in all-White groups said the defendant was guilty, only 34 percent of those in the heterogeneous groups did so (Sommers 603). And "analysis also revealed that Whites in diverse groups were significantly less likely to vote guilty than Whites in all-White groups." These findings are particularly noteworthy, as they provide empirical evidence of the influence of racial composition on verdict preference before any information exchange took place. Prior to this study, the conventional wisdom was that Black jurors brought their unique culture and personal backgrounds to the deliberation table, thereby influencing the jury's outcome. Significantly, Sommers also found that "these differences did not simply result from Black participants adding unique perspectives to the discussions. Rather, White participants were largely responsible for the influence of racial composition." Overall, the heterogeneous groups deliberated longer, discussed more case facts, and made fewer factual errors (Sommers 2006).

Taken together, these three experiments—the murder mystery, the mock jury, and the stock valuations—provide empirical evidence of the positive influence of diversity on performance. Of course, the impact of diversity on performance is not always positive, and not always beneficial. Sometimes, workplace diversity stirs conflict and creates communication problems, making it more of an impediment to performance than a benefit. However, such instances are in the minority and can be addressed through effective management. Thus, well-managed diversity remains a positive influence on performance.

If we think of better performance, improved problem-solving, greater creativity, and organizational flexibility as direct benefits of diversity, then cost reduction, resource acquisition, and marketing success can be considered indirect benefits—realized when performance and the other direct benefits are directed toward them. Thus, there are analogues in the nonprofit world for cost reduction, resource acquisition, marketing, and organizational flexibility.

"Since the publication of the Workforce 2000 study, cost savings and winning the competition for talent are frequently cited as strong arguments for the pursuit of diversity initiatives" (Robinson & Dechant 1997). Cox and Blake report that a number of organizational accommodations—such as daycare and flextime work scheduling—have proven effective in reducing turnover and absenteeism among women and Black employees (Cox and Blake 48).

Given that quit rates among African American women are as much as 61.29% higher than those among White men, and quit rates among Hispanic American women are as much as 67.5% higher ("Women and Minorities' High Quit Rates," 2007), diversity management through such accommodations can only mean significant cost savings and, thereby, an increase in net profit. In for-profit organizations, cost savings directly affect the bottom line by reducing expenses.

Analogously, in nonprofit organizations, cost management and expense control help keep spending in check, ensuring that the organization has sufficient resources to carry out its mission and achieve its goals (Torrico, 2024). While nonprofits may not seek to maximize profits, they do aim to maximize their social impact by fulfilling their missions. Cost management and control enable them to balance their budgets, ensure financial stability and sustainability, and maximize the reach and impact of their services and programs.

Resource acquisition—specifically, attracting and retaining employees from different demographic groups—is another area where a clear analogue exists. Both for-profit and nonprofit organizations need talented employees from these groups and must invariably compete for them. When for-profits succeed in acquiring diverse talent, they benefit from their reasoning, creativity, and innovation, all of which contribute to increased profitability of the company. When nonprofits succeed in acquiring diverse talent, they likewise benefit from those same qualities, which help expand the reach and impact of their services and programs—and, in turn, help support fulfillment of the organization's mission.

Nonprofit marketing, like its for-profit counterpart, is largely strategic rather than "bolted on" as an additional function of the organization. As such, it serves as a principal force that drives the organization's overall management approach. Thus, the marketing department of a hospital may, for example, conduct market research, develop marketing materials, and produce some advertising. However, it is the doctors, nurses, administrative personnel, volunteers and visitors—all of whom make direct contact with patients—who are truly the lifeblood of the hospital's marketing.

Like for-profit organizations, nonprofits build their strategies around the Four Ps of marketing, and use these key elements—product, price, place, and promotion—to influence potential customers. However, nonprofits have a much broader conception of "customers." Whereas in for-profits the term refers to those people and businesses who purchase the organization's products or services, in nonprofits it also includes patients, visitors, volunteers, and donors—all of whom are targeted by the marketing strategy.

Organizational flexibility is essential to the success of both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. It is one of the direct benefits of diversity, which helps enable an organization to adapt and thrive in the face of a changing environment. For-profit organizations need and benefit from flexibility to adapt to market changes and competitor actions in order to remain competitive. For example, when Coke and Pepsi expanded their respective product lines to include sugar-free and low-sugar drinks, they demonstrated flexibility in finding new options to offer their diet-conscious consumers. Flexibility, that is to say, allowed them to address changing consumer preferences. Similarly, Coke's marketing decision to mix ingredients like coffee, lime, or berries with traditional Coke—and launch these products in different countries—reflected flexibility, as the company sought to adapt to local preferences while maintaining its global brand. Pepsi's expansion of its product line beyond beverages to include snacks, cereals, and other food products likewise reflected organizational flexibility.

Sometimes companies respond more directly to their competitors' actions by bringing to market a new product to counter a rival's offering. In 1985, for example, Coke introduced New Coke as a response to the "Pepsi Challenge," a blind taste test showing consumer preference for Pepsi's sweeter taste, and higlighting its growing market share, particularly among younger people. New Coke was reformulated as a sweeter version of the original, exhibiting flexibility in its introduction. The company again demonstrated flexibility when it discontinued the product in response to widespread consumer complaints.

To be clear, I am not arguing that these examples of organizational flexibility are attributable to diversity. Evidence suggests that, at the time, Cocal Cola was far from achieveing a truly diverse workforce. So, the flexibility might be more accurately attributable to some other phenomenon. Some examples of organizational flexibility are attributable to diversity; others are not. Better examples of organizational flexibility linked to diversity might therefore be Avalon Bay Corporation—which in 2020 used cultural diversity to turn around low profitability in its inner city markets by empowering Black and Hispanic managers with substantial authority over those markets—and L'Oreal's success in emerging markets, generally attributed to its multicultural product development teams (Hong, & Doz, 2013).

The view that cases such as Avalon Bay Corporation and L'Oreal are attributable to diversity are strengthened, moreover, by research which shows that women and racial and ethnic minorities "tend to have especially flexible cognitive structures" (Cox and Blake, 1991, p.51). That is to say, there is some evidence, that women have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than men and, from studies of bilingual subcultures, that racial-ethnic minorities have higher levels of divergent thinking—thinking outside the box—and cognitive flexibility. "Since the incidence of bilingualism is much greater among minority culture groups (especially Hispanics and Asians) than the majority-white Anglo group, this research strongly suggests that cognitive flexibility is enhanced by the inclusion of these groups in predominantly Anglo workforces." (Cox & Blake, 1991, p. 52). While neither Avalon Bay Corporation's empowerment of Black and Hispanic managers in its inner city markets, nor L'Oreal's use of multicultural teams in emerging markets conclusively establishes a causal link between the participation of women and racial and ethnic minorities in these initiatives and their successful outcomes, they do suggest an influence of one on the other.

Analogous to for-profit organizations' need for flexibility to adapt to changing markets and to the acts of their competitors, nonprofit organizations need flexibility to respond to changing social needs, technological advances, and shifts in financial resources. Changing community demographics—such as an aging population, an influx of new immigrants, or a rising birth rate, to name a few—create new needs that require nonprofits to be flexible and adaptive in their strategies and services. Advances in technology often widen the digital divide and call for adaptable responses from nonprofits, such as digital skills training and support services. They may, for example, provide computer access in libraries and community centers, offer free computer training, and collaborate with businesses and government to share expertise and resources. Then, too, every nonprofit is likely to face declining or disappearing financial resources at some point. When government grants expire, or donors withdraw their support, nonprofits must be flexible and creative in exploring alternative funding sources and developing new funding models.

An example of a nonprofit demonstrating flexibility is Goodwill Industries, whose flexibility is baked into its organizational structure, which may be characterized as a decentralized federation. Goodwill Industries International (GII) is an umbrella organization whose mission, as already noted (Cardoni), is to offer training and placement services to disadvantaged individuals. Each of the 150–165 local organizations under this umbrella is completely autonomous, with its own CEO, board of directors, and programs. While sharing the overarching mission of GII, these local organizations manage their own stores, donation centers, job training programs, and placement services—tailoring their services and programs to the specific needs of the local community and job market. The autonomous nature of these local Goodwills thus allows for flexibility in their program and service offerings, and eo ipso in those of Goodwill Industries International.

Moreover, if flexibility is embedded in Goodwill's structure, then diversity is inherent in its mission. From its inception Goodwill has extended its services to all disadvantaged individuals, without regard to race, creed, or color. Because part of its mission is to train and place these individuals in jobs that enable them to become self-sufficient, Goodwill sometimes employs them in its own stores. This engenders, therefore, a kind of symbiotic relationship between the community it serves and the people it employs. In response to the question, "Why is the clothing in your stores organized by color rather than by size?" a leader of Goodwill Industries of San Joaquin Valley responded by pointing out that many of their employees are mentally or physically challenged, and would have difficulty hanging items by size, but are able to match colors (Goodwill 6). Thus, diversity in the community impacts the diversity of the staff, which, in turn, influences flexibility.

A diverse team enables nonprofits to reach and relate to diverse groups within the community, thereby increasing their overall reach and impact. When, as in the case of Goodwill Industries, a work team reflects the diversity of the community, it promotes flexibility and enhances resource acquisition—such as recruitment, donor engagement, and volunteerism. Moreover, as I have argued throughout this paper, a diverse workforce also enhances creativity and innovation, and improves decision-making and problem-solving, thereby strengthening overall performance. When these direct benefits are applied toward cost reduction and marketing success, they positively influence those areas as well. Overall, it appears that nonprofits enjoy the same benefits as for-profits. Whereas in for-profits these benefits affect profitability, in nonprofits they contribute to greater social impact through mission achievement.

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