

THE INFLUENCE OF IDENTIFICATION ON NONPROFIT BOARD MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	3
BACKGROUND .....	4
STUDY METHODS AND SAMPLE .....	7
BOARD MEMBER LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT .....	8
IDENTIFICATION AND BOARD MEMBER ENGAGEMENT .....	9
IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS .....	11
LEADER'S ROLE IN MANAGING POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION .....	12
BOARD PROFILE OF DANA MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS .....	15
REFERENCES .....	17

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A board member is a critical volunteer in a nonprofit organization. This person is part of a leadership group that has fiduciary oversight of the organization and its mission. The group is obligated to monitor the nonprofit and ensure that resources are available. Examination of nonprofit performance indicates that an important contributor to its success is a highly engaged board of directors. Unfortunately, nonprofit leaders often comment that their board members are not actively participating in the important monitoring and resource provision work. This study sought to uncover factors that may influence this lack of engagement.

Social science research has explored the degree to which a person feels connected to a particular organization or work group and its influence on work outcomes. This identification links a person's self-concept to a particular group in which he/she feels aligned. Positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, creative behavior, commitment, cooperation, and beneficial decision-making have been linked to this sense of identification. Other dimensions of identification, or degrees, such as defining oneself by not being part of a group, or only connecting with portions of a group, or not at all -- often lead to behaviors that are counterproductive to a group's objectives.

Individuals may cognitively attach themselves to multiple groups at any one time. Group membership may be broad (being a member of the human race) or specific (such as being part of the law profession, a volunteer, or a board member). Prior research has suggested that a group with which a person cognitively identifies with the most influences their behavior, and at times can serve to be counterproductive to another group's outcomes.<sup>1</sup> In the context of a board, there are many different groups a particular board member may identify with such as the nonprofit, the board, or even their profession, and their degree of identification may vary as well – affecting their level of engagement.

This study explored the degrees of identification among board directors of nonprofit member agencies of DANA, the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement. The dimensions of identification with the organization, board group, and the board member's profession were explored to determine their influence on engagement. The study uncovered that board members do find multiple identities salient, and their level of engagement is influenced by the dimensions of identification with those various identities. Those board members who positively identified with the board group and nonprofit organization were more likely to engage in both monitoring and resource provision activities. On the contrary, it also uncovered the disruptive influence of ambivalent identification, disidentification, and neutral identification toward board member engagement. This phenomenon is prevalent whether the board member identified with the organization or with the board group.

Further analysis revealed that positive identification with either the board group or organization can help to override the negative influence of disassociating with the other group. But if a board member is disassociating with the board group, it diffuses the positive effects of organizational identification.

Leaders have the ability to strengthen a board member's positive identification through a series of communication and prestige-building activities. The study confirmed that participating in certain activities - in particular, providing resources - reinforced positive identification. Recommendations to influence identification are offered.

## BACKGROUND FOR THIS STUDY

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) make a tremendous contribution to United States society. The Independent Sector summarized the latest findings from the National Center for Charitable Statistics on the role of nonprofits, which:

- Contributed more than 5% to the national GDP in 2011
- Employed over 13.5 million in 2009
- Contributed to over 9% of wages earned in 2009<sup>2</sup>

In Delaware, the nonprofit sector's impact is also considerable, generating over \$3.2 billion in annual revenue, holding over \$8 billion in assets, and employing over 43,000 workers.<sup>3</sup>

But a sizeable amount of NPO labor resources come from unpaid workers, or volunteers. Nationally, more than 62 million people volunteered in 2010, equating to a wage value of \$173 billion<sup>2</sup>. Volunteer activity can range from transporting the elderly, feeding the homeless and facility maintenance, to administrative support and leadership. One essential volunteer role is serving as a member of a non-profit board of directors.

Nonprofit board members are charged with ensuring the nonprofit fulfills its mission while meeting the regulatory guidelines for maintaining its nonprofit status. Nonprofit board members are critical volunteers to the life and health of nonprofit organizations. Studies have shown that performance of a nonprofit board and the group's organizational performance are linked<sup>3</sup>. Given the competitive climate for funding, many grant making institutions, donors, and the community are expecting board members to increase and improve engagement in their roles.

### The Problem

Yet despite the importance of their involvement, nonprofit executives often indicate that board members are not engaging in the critical activities of monitoring the organization or providing resources. One study reports less than half of nonprofit board members are active in important board functions as fundraising, monitoring the board, evaluating the CEO, or planning.<sup>5</sup>

Little research is available to inform nonprofit leaders about factors that impact board member engagement in monitoring and resource provision activities. Monitoring is defined as the board's role to ensure stakeholder interests are upheld by management, and includes such activities as:

- financial and legal oversight
- selecting and evaluating the CEO
- monitoring organizational performance
- Evaluating board performance.<sup>6</sup>

Resource provision activities seek to provide the vision, direction and resources to ensure the organization can meet its mission, and include the following tasks:

- setting strategy
- recruiting board members
- raising funds
- promoting the organization and serving as a network to important individuals and groups
- representing stakeholder interests <sup>6</sup>

High-performance boards must actively engage in both monitoring and resource provision, but the statistics indicate that in many cases this is not happening.

### **This Study's Investigation**

This study explored one possible explanation of board member engagement – the influence of identification. Behavioral studies reveal that people tend to classify themselves and define who they are in the context of group membership. This is called identification (ID) - the self-perception of oneness with a group – or being connected. Group membership may be as broad as being human or female, or connect with specific groups such as golfers, parents, lawyers, volunteers, and board members. It is a process in which one transitions from being an outsider of a group to becoming one with the group.<sup>7,8</sup> One can see this transformation as a new group member changes from saying “you” to “we.”

Studies in many group contexts have shown that identification with a group leads to positive behaviors such as job/work satisfaction, creative behavior, coordinated actions, cooperation, turnover intentions, commitment, extra-role performance, organizational citizenship behavior, leader-follower relationships, and beneficial decision-making.<sup>9</sup> Its relevance to board member behavior was revealed in the 1997 seminal qualitative study by Golden-Biddle & Rao.<sup>10</sup>

### **Different Dimensions of Identification**

As early as 1959, Erikson<sup>11</sup> described different identity states. They include the loss of identity, where one overidentifies with a group, or in the other extreme, identity diffusion, where one disidentifies with another person or group. Forty years later, social scientists were able to test these different dimensions of identification and found they led to different types of behaviors.<sup>12,13,14</sup> These different dimensions most likely exist among board members, and the question is whether they impact their engagement.

Building on the work of prior scholars, this research explores four dimensions of identification among board members:

- positive identification (ID) – a sense of connectiveness with a group
- negative – or disidentification (DI) – actively disassociating with a group
- both positive and negative - ambivalent identification (AI) – connecting with some parts and disconnecting with others
- neither positive nor negative - neutral identification (NI) – neither connecting or disconnecting

### **Which Identity Matters**

People serve on boards for a variety of reasons. They may be passionate about the nonprofit's mission, seek to use their professional expertise to benefit others, or enjoy the prestige of being affiliated with a nonprofit board. Whatever the reason, a nonprofit board of directors is comprised of members who identify with many different groups, and those groups may influence their behaviors. Studies have shown that behaviors are driven by which group identity is most relevant.<sup>1,15</sup> Because individuals tend to identify with groups that enhance self-esteem and act to protect that esteem, it is conceivable that saliency with one group could result in behaving counter to the norms of the nonprofit organization. It is also possible the reverse is true. If an individual identifies with the organization, but disidentifies with a work group (such as a nonprofit board), then positive behavior may be directed toward the nonprofit, while negative behaviors are directed toward the board group.

In a leadership group such as a board of directors, where individuals are recruited due to their profession, passion for the organization, or the board work, evaluating behaviors through the lens of one identity can result in a limited understanding of board member behaviors.

### **Exploring Nonprofit Board Member Identification and its impact on Engagement**

This study explored whether the different identification dimensions toward the nonprofit organization, board group, or a board member's profession influence the important responsibilities of monitoring and resource provision. This research is the first to profile board members of Delaware nonprofits and explore this important area of activity. For ease in reporting, the following acronyms were applied in this report for ease in reading

#### **Coding Table**

	<u>Organization</u>	<u>Board</u>	<u>Profession</u>
Identification	OID	BID	PID
Disidentification	ODI	BDI	PDI
Ambivalent Identification	OAI	BAI	PAI
Neutral Identification	ONI	BNI	PNI

This report presents a summary of a study completed to fulfill dissertation requirements for the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES). It includes an abbreviated list of references. A complete list of references and analytics may be requested by writing to Dr. Sheila Bravo at [sbravo@bravoconsults.com](mailto:sbravo@bravoconsults.com). The study was implemented under the direction of Dr. Prince Attoh from Delaware State University, and committee members Dr. Pamela LeLand of the LeLand Leadership Group, Dr. Michael Costello and Dr. Tao Gong from UMES, and Dr. Thomas Costello from Salisbury University. It was approved by UMES's *Institutional Review Board* prior to its deployment. This certification verified that all ethical proponents of this study were in order to curtail risk to the survey responders.

### **Study Limitations**

There are some limitations to note regarding this research. All measures are based on the perceptions of the nonprofit board members and could lead to bias. In addition, this sample is drawn from a population of nonprofit charities which are members of a state advocacy agency, and therefore may not represent nonprofit boards in general. Given this data is cross-sectional, alternative causal effects could be in play which are not captured during data collection. And finally, the nature of the sampling technique limits the generalization of the findings.

Given that positive identification is known to influence engagement, it is possible that board members who disidentify, are ambivalent or are neutral did not choose to participate in the study. Therefore, the sample may over-state the distribution of those who positively identify, and understate those who may be disconnected or ambivalent to the organization or board. Caution should be used when interpreting the results of the negative dimensions of identification due to the low number in the sample.

## STUDY METHODS AND SAMPLE

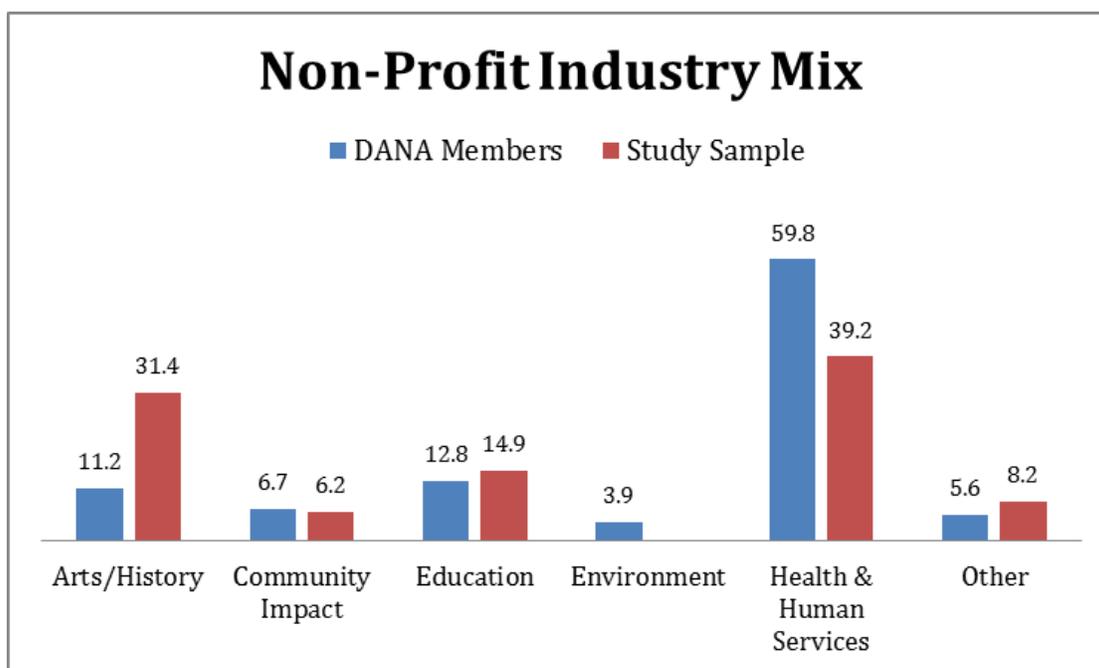
### Methodology

Participants in this study were board members who served as directors of Delaware 501(c) 3 nonprofit public charities that were members of the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (formerly called the Delaware Association of Nonprofit Agencies - DANA). When the study was deployed in March 2011, there were 179 public charities within the DANA membership. A survey was used to collect the information and was delivered either by an online format or via paper/pencil, whichever method was selected by the participating organization.

The member organizations were sent an introduction to the study by DANA. Interested organizations discussed the study, and if they agreed to proceed then the Executive Director or the Board President introduced the study to members of their board.

### Sample Profile

Of the 33 organizations that initially expressed interest in the study, 25 agreed to participate. Industry representation of those who participated was slightly different from the DANA membership makeup, including more participation by art/history organizations and fewer health & human service nonprofits.

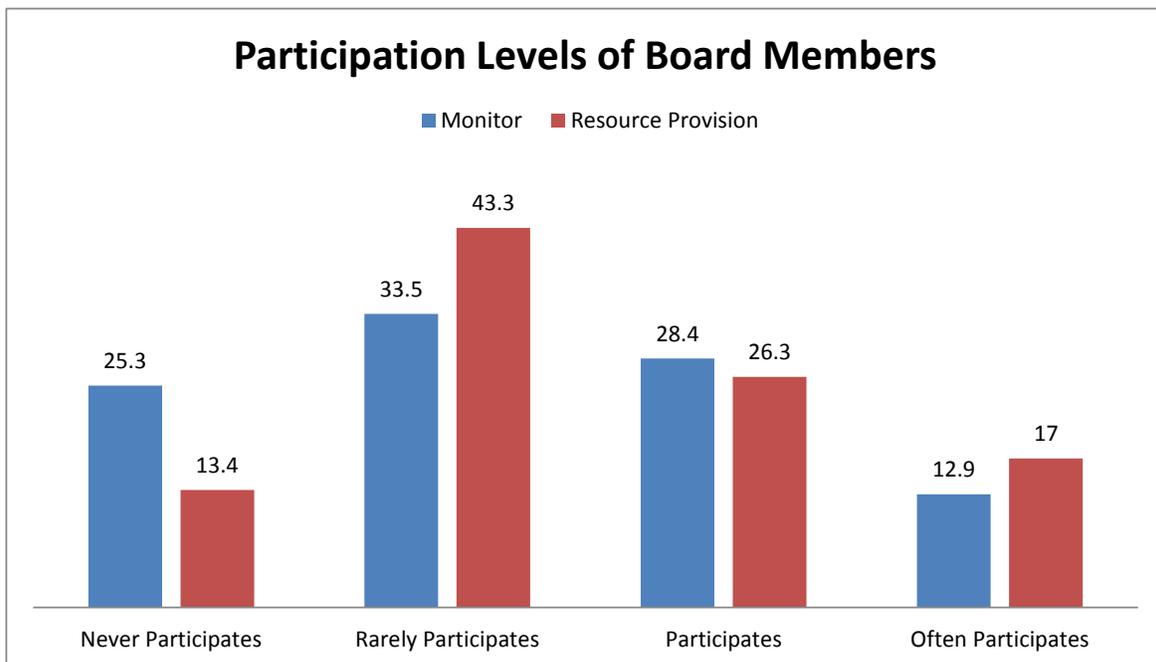


Note: DANA membership organizations as of March 2011

A total of 420 board members received the study, of which 201 returned surveys. Upon review of the responses, seven surveys were deemed not usable, leaving a total of 194 respondents, or a 48 percent response rate. The average number of board members per organization was 15, with boards ranging in size from three to 30 members.

## BOARD MEMBER LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

The first investigation measured board member engagement in monitoring and resource provision activities. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they participated in select activities using a scale, with 0 representing never and 5 representing often. Consistent with national statistics, fewer than half of board members in this study reported they participate or participate often in monitoring and resource provision activities.



Within each category, there are some notable findings. For activities related to monitoring:

- Monitoring the organization's performance and overseeing financial management had higher levels of participation.
- Evaluation of the organization's CEO (or Executive Director) and reviewing board performance had the lowest area of participation.

For activities related to providing resources:

- Three areas in this category revealed higher participation rates – raising funds for the nonprofit organization, representing it externally to others, and serving as a link to important groups the nonprofit deals with.
- Recruiting new board members received the lowest participation scores.



### *A Board Member's identification with the Organization*

Positive identification (OID) with the organization significantly influences board member engagement. It has a stronger effect on providing resources than monitoring. The other three dimensions (ODI, OAI and ONI) all had a negative influence on engagement. A board member who disidentifies with the organization will be less likely to engage, and the same result was true for the other two dimensions. Ambivalence had the greatest negative effect.

### *A Board Member's identification with the Board*

Positive identification (BID) with this group also positively influenced a board member's participation in monitoring and resource provision activities. Similar to the organizational identity level, its impact is stronger for providing resources. The other three dimensions (BDI, BAI and BNI) had a negative influence toward engagement. Board disidentification had the greatest negative effect, and board ambivalent identification was only influential towards monitoring levels.

### *A Board Member's identification with his or her Profession*

The four profession identifications did have some influence, but were not statistically significant strong in impacting engagement.

## **Positive and Negative Identification across Board and Organization Identity Groups**

Additional analysis was conducted to understand whether the positive identification toward one identity group would offset the negative influence toward another identity group, and vice versa. In other words, if a board member experienced positive identification with the nonprofit organization – but was ambivalent, neutral or even disidentified with the board group – would that influence engagement on monitoring and resource provision activities? Organization and board identification dimensions were evaluated, to determine whether:

- OID enhances the influence of BID toward engagement
- BID enhances the influence of OID toward engagement
- OID diffuses the influence of BDI, BAI, and BNI toward engagement
- BID diffuses the influence of ODI, OAI, and ONI toward engagement
- BDI diffuses the influence of OID toward engagement

The results were mixed based on the activity of the board member, specifically:

- A board member does not need to identify positively with both the organization and the board in order to be engaged in monitoring and resource provision activities.
- The strength of positive identification towards one group does diffuse negative influence of the other dimensions towards resource provision activities.
- This effect was not exhibited on the influence toward monitoring activities.
- Positive identification towards one group is not enough to detract from the negative influence of the other dimensions.
- When a board member disidentifies with the board group it does significantly diffuse the positive effects of organizational identification for both monitoring and resource provision activities.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS

### **The Power of Positive Identification of Nonprofit Board Members**

This study confirms that positive identification leads to positive outcomes in engagement in monitoring and resource provision activities. In particular, it exhibits a stronger influence on engagement in resource provision than monitoring behaviors. These statistics may not be surprising when one considers the activities included in providing resources to a nonprofit. Many resource provision activities are related to connecting to other people (e.g., recruiting new board members, representing the interests of stakeholders, acting as a link), which is a part of the identification process. The need to identify is an essential desire, which expands a person's understanding of oneself- to include connections with others and to belong to a larger group. Therefore, activities that relate to identification would seem to be outcomes from that act of connecting.

### **Identification with the Board and Organization are Important**

It was interesting to learn that it is not the saliency of the identity target, but the strength of the identification (or disidentification) that influences board member engagement. Board identification significantly offsets the effects of the three negative organizational identification dimensions on resource provision activities. And organizational identification also had a similar diffusing influence on the three negative board identification dimensions on resource provision activities.

This suggests that positive identification with either group level will have a significant influence on board member engagement. In this study, organizational identification did have a slightly higher influence on monitoring and resource provision engagement than board identification. This may be due to the fact that board members, as a leadership group, may focus on overall organizational issues rather than issues related to the work of the board.

### **The Countermanding Force of Disidentification**

Disidentification is an active disassociation of one's identity with a particular group, Other studies indicate that individuals who disidentify with a group actually work against it, and may also wish to leave the group<sup>10</sup>. Though there were few respondents in this sample who exhibited board or organizational disidentification, they do exist within board groups. That perspective has a significant and detrimental effect on engagement in monitoring and resource provision activities.

Board disidentification's influence is strong enough to diffuse a person's positive engagement behaviors associated with organizational identification. This negative influence over positive identification suggests a force within the board group that could undermine board performance, and thus organizational performance.

### **The Mixed Influence of Ambivalent Identification and Board Engagement**

Ambivalent identification negatively impacted monitoring engagement. This phenomenon indicates that a board member identifies with some aspects of the group, but also disidentifies with other parts of the group's identity. One explanation may be the primary work of the board relative to the desire to be part of it. One of the top reasons board members join a board is because they are committed to the nonprofit's mission.

Yet the monitoring activities, such as evaluating the CEO, monitoring finances or ensuring legal compliance, are technical tasks and different from mission fulfillment tasks.

Organizational ambivalence had a strong negative influence, indicating a sizeable drop in engagement when this dimension exists. The relationship between organizational disidentification and organizational ambivalent identification warrants notice. Board members who experience high ambivalent identification are already to some degree disidentifying with an aspect of the organization or board group. Studies indicate that a person will not be in this state long - they will either transition toward disidentification or identification.<sup>16</sup>

### **Neutral Identification and Board Engagement**

This dimension influenced engagement in a negative manner. However, it was only significant at the organizational level toward resource provision engagement. These results support other studies<sup>13</sup> where the intentional detachment to an identity led to little or no engagement.

### **Professional Identification and Board Engagement**

Professional identification had no impact on either engagement in monitoring or resource provision activities. This was a surprising finding, as board members are often recruited to serve on boards due to their profession or skill.<sup>5</sup> One reason for these results could be the specific tasks included in monitoring and resource provision activities.

A supplemental analysis was conducted to determine whether board members in specific professions were more likely to engage in certain activities. Given that several items within the monitoring role are related to financial and legal activities, those members who had careers related to these tasks (finance and legal) were compared to those with other types of professions. The analysis revealed no difference in monitoring engagement by finance/law professionals than the remainder of the sample.

## **THE LEADER'S ROLE IN MANAGING POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION**

Haslam and Platow<sup>15</sup> called leaders “entrepreneurs of identity,” and as such leaders need to be aware of the power of identification with the board group as well as the organization. Though prior research has highlighted the role of organizational identification in board member behavior<sup>8</sup>, this study suggests that the board group is also a salient identity in which board members identify and disidentify.

Both board and organizational identification have a positive influence on engagement, but the other three dimensions have an influence in reducing board member engagement. In particular, ambivalent identification's negative impact to engagement, and its high correlation to the effects of disidentification, bears notice. It suggests individuals experiencing this identification dimension may already be cognitively separating themselves from the board group's identity or the organization's identity, lessening their interest in participating. It also should be noted that the power of disidentification with the board, can countermand the positive engagement effects of organizational identification.

Given the study revealed that positive identification with one salient group can override the negative influence of other identification dimensions towards another salient group, it would benefit nonprofit leaders to seek methods to strengthen positive identification to improve engagement levels.

Leaders have the ability to influence follower identification. Haslam and Platow found that leaders' ability to garner support and engage followers is "enhanced to the extent that they are able to advance the collective interests and aspirations of the group".<sup>17</sup> They believe that group members will be more supportive of a leader who explicitly highlights the positive and prestigious distinctiveness of the group over others. Leaders need to take steps to keep board members positively identified with the board group and organization, and to move those who are ambivalent (such as those who are just joining a board) to positive identification. Several studies have highlighted factors that influence positive identification. The data from this research provides additional insight. Below are actions nonprofit leaders can take to improve identification.

### **Promote the benefits of being a member of the organization or Board**

People identify with groups that improve their self-esteem - groups which are perceived to have prestige. Providing information that positively distinguishes the board group and organization from others - creating a sense of prestige - can aid in moving board members toward positive identification.

### **Communicate frequently and encourage communication among board members**

Frequent communication helps board members feel a part of the group. Creating a sense of pride by acknowledging their efforts and being part of the team also enhances positive identity. Thus the leader would be wise to highlight the good work the board is doing, its impact, and how their membership can make a difference.

### **Routinely evaluate how the organization and board are performing to expectations**

Reviewing the board's performance and monitoring the organization has a positive and significant influence on organizational and board identification. This evaluation process reinforces how their work is important and provides opportunity for discussion and decision making. In addition, evaluating performance against a benchmark of other organizations may support attitudes of prestige and pride.

### **Invite more committee participation and rotate committee chair leadership**

Inviting board members to lead and use their expertise and experience to participate in decision making helps in maintaining positive identification. Analysis from this study shows a positive correlation between serving on a committee or chairing a committee and organizational identification. Chairing a committee also positively influences board identification.

### **Engage board members in recruiting and orienting other board members**

This study revealed a strong correlation between recruiting new board members and organizational and board identification. This may be due to the fact that in order to ask someone to join the board, the current board member must feel positive about the organization and proud enough to invite others to be part of it.

The orientation process is a critical part of securing positive identification. As a new member comes onto the board, they need feel part of the team. Moving from "I" to "we" and "you" to "us" is a cognitive transition. It requires a set of identifiers that help new members perceive their identities are improved through an association with the board and organization. For example, the leader may emphasize to the new member the positive influence the nonprofit makes in the community and the effectiveness of the board and organization. It also helps in the identification process to make clear what tasks are necessary for the new member to contribute to the board's effectiveness to ensure the nonprofit's positive community impact.

**Encourage participation in raising funds and other resources**

Giving financially or asking others to give is an expectation of many board members. In this study 80 percent indicated they made a financial gift. Yet 33 percent indicated they rarely or never help to raise funds. The act of asking others to give to the organization is similar to asking someone to join the board. It requires a sense of pride in the organization's work and a desire to make a difference.

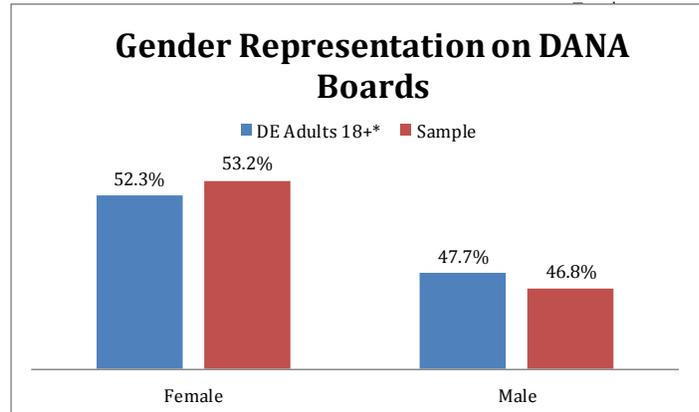
**Reducing Disidentification and Ambivalent Identification**

The steps listed above not only positively influence level of identification, but also may have a negative effect on disidentification and ambivalent identification. However, increased communication and requests for engagement may for some reinforce their sense of not wishing to be affiliated with the board or organization. For those who resist in asking others to give, or do not wish to invite others to serve on the board, it may be in their best interest and that of the nonprofit for them to leave. As a practitioner who has worked with many boards, I can attest that this is an extremely difficult decision, but as this study reveals, disidentification has an influence that can interfere in the positive effects of identification.

## PROFILE OF BOARD MEMBERS IN DANA MEMBER NONPROFITS

### Gender Representation

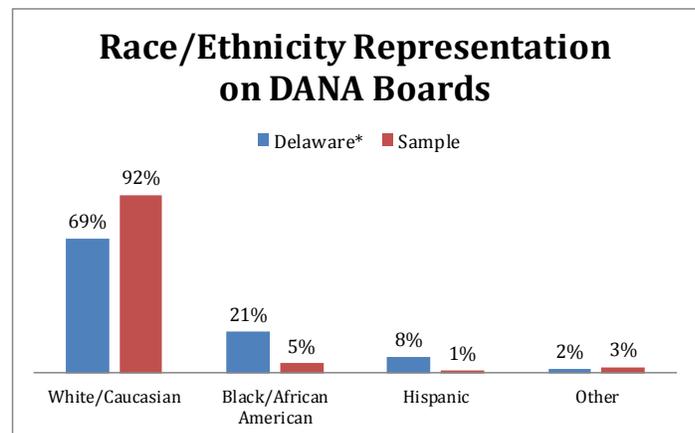
Participating board members were primarily female (53 percent), which is similar to the adult gender representation across Delaware. But this is different from national statistics on board member gender. According to Boardsource (2007), board member make-up in the U.S. is majority male (57 percent).



\*2010 U.S. Census Data

### Race/Ethnicity Representation

Most respondents self-described as Caucasian (92 percent), which is a considerably higher representation of this population segment than in the state. At the national level, boards are more ethnically diverse, with 86 percent white representation. Many of the agencies who participated in this study indicate they particularly serve African American and Hispanic communities, indicating that either there was a higher response rate among Caucasian board members, or that these boards do not reflect the constituents they serve.



\*2010 U.S. Census Data

### Employment Characteristics

Study participants exhibited diverse employment characteristics. Seventy-four percent of the study sample indicated they were employed (with a quarter of the respondents working in a business setting), and 22 percent designated they were retired. Those not employed/not retired was small, at a little over 3 percent.

Employment Characteristics	
<b>Status</b>	
Employed by a non-profit	22.7
Employed by government	7.2
Employed by business	25.3
Self-employed	19.1
Retired/Not Employed	25.8
n = 194	

No one type of professional skill or occupation dominated this sample, but there were some noted segments:

- Professions related to monitoring activities (law, finance, business) represented 36 percent of the sample.
- Professions related to providing resources (fundraising, marketing, human resources) comprised another 19 percent.
- Other professions mentioned tended to align with the type of nonprofit in which they served, such as a social worker who serves on a health and human services board.
- Only a third of board members indicated their profession was in the same field as the nonprofit organization.

Employment Characteristics	
Profession/Skill %	
Marketing/sales/fundraising	13.9
Law	12.4
Business/GM	11.9
Finance/accounting	11.3
Healthcare	7.7
Artistic profession	6.7
IT/human resources	5.2
Government/public affairs	5.2
Other	25.8
Profession in Same field as NPO %	
Yes	32.6
No	67.4
n = 194	

### Board Member Characteristics

Several characteristics related to serving on a board were included in the study to understand the board member activity level. The first was the amount of time a board member gives to the organization. This was evaluated by asking the number of years they served on the board, their attendance level, the amount of hours they give to board work, and the amount of hours they give to volunteering above and beyond board work. Additional data was collected on whether they have had board training, serve on a committee, serve as a committee chair, give financially and whether they sit on other boards.

- Board members reported they attend, on average, three-quarters of scheduled board meetings, with nearly a third reporting they come to all board meetings.
- The average board member has served more than five years. But there was a quite a range in the sample - nearly half had served on the board for three years or less (44.6 percent), while a quarter (26.4 percent) have been on their boards for over six years.
- In a typical month, they give nearly eight hours on average to board service.
- More than half (60 percent) confirmed they volunteer beyond their board duties.
- In total, an average board member gives 12 hours monthly in time to the nonprofit
- The average number of boards a director serves is two, but nearly half (44 percent) said they only serve on one board.
- Fewer than half participated in board training in the past year (41 percent).
- Most serve on a committee (82 percent), but fewer than half hold a committee chair position (47 percent).
- And though the majority made a financial gift to the nonprofit (80 percent), that contribution represented less than 1 percent of the respondents' income. Less than a fifth donated more than 1 percent of their income to the nonprofit.

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*Note: this is a partial list of references. For a complete list, contact the author at [sbravo@bravoconsults.com](mailto:sbravo@bravoconsults.com).*