

Organizational Study: Belmont University

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Such concepts as organizational leadership and governance are essential to enabling a higher educational institution to effectively function, however it seems that available research on the issue is scarce (Austin & Jones, 2015). This report aims to conduct in-depth exploration of an educational organization – Belmont University. Specifically, the report will focus on the history of the establishment, its mission, objectives and policies, current programs and curricula, administrative structures and governance. By analyzing the available evidence, the report will identify governance-related issues facing the institution in order to understand whether Belmont’s leadership and governance practices are aligned with the modern challenges.

Research Analysis

History and description

Belmont University was founded in 1890 as a private Christian university, and has emphasized its Christian identity since. The campus is located in Nashville, Tennessee and was originally founded by Ida Hood and Susan Heron. In 1913 the school underwent a merger with Ward Seminary and became known as Ward-Belmont College. Initially, the educational institution was open for women only. Currently, over 8,400 students from 36 countries are enrolled in the university. Among them are 6,800 undergraduate students and 1,600 graduate students. Currently, the university enjoys 13:1 student to faculty staff member ratio, while 89% of the classes have less than 30 enrolled students (Belmont.edu, 2020).

Belmont University is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission, and thus is eligible to award baccalaureate, master’s and PhD degrees. In addition, the institution has been named one of the fastest growing Christian higher educational

institutions in the United States. This growth can be at least partially attributed to the strategy of repeated mergers, adopted by the university's leadership (Small, 2020).

Mission, objectives, policies

Belmont University's mission statement is currently formulated as follows: to be "... a student-centered Christian community providing an academically challenging education that empowers men and women of diverse backgrounds to engage and transform the world with disciplined intelligence, compassion, courage and faith" (Belmont.edu, 2020). The university's current mission is formulated as: "To be a leader among teaching universities, bringing together the best of liberal arts and professional education in a Christian community of learning and service" (Belmont.edu, 2020). Finally, the university's values are centered around its Baptist heritage as the organization prides itself on being a student-centered community. Among the core values the institution adheres to are: integrity, collaboration, inquiry, humility and service.

Performance of Belmont University is based on a number of official and unofficial policies and regulations. According to Lewin (2017), it is the internal rules and policies that contribute to creating a certain type of culture within an educational institution. Belmont University openly positions itself as an institution for Christian youth, helping adolescents seek and find their professional identity. This also means that the university avoids hiring personnel (faculty members), who are not Christian. Christianity and moral beliefs are tightly integrated into various aspects and policies of the campus life, educational curriculum, etc. (Belmont.edu, 2020). The following sub-section of the report will discuss the current programs and curricula of Belmont University in greater detail, and will attempt to connect them to the mission, vision and values discussed above.

Programs and curricula

As of 2020, Belmont University offers over 130 educational programs. Being a four year university, the institution aims to increase competitiveness of its graduates by developing new types of programs based on ongoing evaluation of the labor market. Among some of the recently introduced programs are: Business Systems & Analytics, Data Science, Biophysics, Social Media Management, Hospitality & Tourism Management, and Architecture (Belmont.edu, 2020).

Programs offered by the university can be broadly categorized into three groups: (1) undergraduate programs; (2) graduate professional programs; and (3) adult degree programs.

Among some of the undergraduate programs available for the students of Belmont University are: Accounting, Applied Mathematics, Art, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Business Systems and Analytics, Chemistry, Data Science, Early Childhood Education, English, Environmental Science, etc. Some examples of the Graduate and Professional programs include: Doctorate of Nursing Practice, Doctorate of Occupational Therapy, Doctorate of Pharmacy, Justice Doctor, Master of Arts, Master of Business Administration, Master of Education, etc. For adult learners, the university offers programs in the fields of Accounting, General Business, Liberal Studies, Ministry, Nursing, Social Work, Public Relations Management (Belmont.edu, 2020).

It is important to stress that as per argument by Lewin (2017), Belmont University has been consistent in aligning its mission and values with the core curriculum. More specifically, the university offers a number of programs directly related to Christian studies: Church Leadership and Administration, Christian Leadership, Church Music, Ministry, and Worship Leadership.

Administrative structures and leadership

In regards to its administrative structures, the university is based on a complex system of campus offices and support services: Administrative Technology, Campus Security, Office of Communications, Counseling Services, Health Services, HR, Office of Institutional Effectiveness, and Auxiliary Services to name several (Belmont.edu, 2020). Belmont University consists of a number of schools and colleges, among them: College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, College of Music and Performing Arts, College of Law, College of Pharmacy, College of Sciences and Mathematics, College of Theology and Christian Ministry, Jack C. Massey College of Business, O'More College of Architecture, Art and Design, Gordon E. Inman College of Health Sciences & Nursing, Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business. Despite the growing number of schools and colleges, Belmont University can be characterized as a centralized institution, which means that key strategies and decisions are made in a centralized manner by the uppermost leadership. Although this type of administrative structure is the most common among the U.S. educational institutions, its limitation is associated with a decreased freedom and flexibility of individual units (Lewin, 2017). In the case of Belmont University, centralized decision-making can make some of its units (e.g. College of Science and Mathematics) less flexible and adaptable to the rapidly changing U.S. job market. Indirect evidence of such lack of quick response is the fact that the abovementioned college has introduced one such popular specialty, i.e. Biophysics, only in 2020 (Belmont.edu, 2020).

Belmont University's senior leadership is currently represented by its University President (Dr. Robert C. Fisher), Provost (Dr. Thomas Burns), Vice President and Chief of Staff (Dr. Susan H. West), Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness (Dr. Paula A. Gill), Vice President for Spiritual Development (Dr. Todd L. Lake), and Vice President for Finance and

Operations (Steven T. Lasley) (Belmont.edu, 2020). As discussed above, the university demonstrates cohesion in regards to its values and spirituality, which can be illustrated by the included role of Vice President for Spiritual Development. In fact the leadership of the university is expected to adhere to the highest moral and ethical principles of Christian dogma. Naturally, the institutional governance is also largely determined by its strong and long-lasting Christian heritage.

Governance

Within the context of leadership and higher education, Belmont's adapted concept of governance plays an important role. Governance typically refers to the organizational processes and structures, developed to establish transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, rule of law, student and teacher empowerment, stakeholder participation, etc. (Wise et al., 2020). In case of Belmont University, governance- related issues are addressed via specifically designed organs (structures), regulations and guidelines. For example, one crucial structure within the university is focused on data governance: Data Governance (DG) Steering Committee. DG is the highest level of authority, responsible for reviewing data systems on campus. Leadership of the different structural units participate in the process, by developing goals and setting direction for data governance. Data Standards Committee is another structural element, responsible for developing standards in regards to data management and usage (Belmont.edu, 2020). Belmont University is also committed to solving a number of environmental and sustainability problems, as a part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy. The university has developed a 2030 Vision, in accordance with which the institution aims to solve a number of operational problems related to recycling, energy consumption, use of renewable energy, etc.

Despite the University's effort to address governance-related problems and concerns, the educational institutions is facing a number of challenges in this field. For example, in 2020 it has become known that the Watkins College of Art located in Nashville, will be absorbed by and become a part of Belmont University (Small, 2020). This news has sparked a great deal of controversy due to the fact that internal cultures of the two educational institutions differ significantly. The core of the problem is the fact that the Watkins College of Art is a non-Christian educational institution, where neither staff nor students are expected to follow Christian religious practices. Another concern has been voiced by the LGBT community of the college, which fears for their status in Belmont University (Small, 2020). It is not yet clear how leadership of the university will use the existing guidelines to tackle the concern.

Another serious concern stems from the comparison of Belmont University to the national average in the United States. Available statistics (see Figure 1) strongly suggests that there exist a number of diversity and inclusion-related issues, which have not been addressed within the context of the current governance practices in the institution. Among these specific issues are ethnic and gender diversity. According to the argument by Caner et al. (2019), diversity inclusion issues are highly relevant to the context of educational leadership and organization. Discriminatory practices and organizational barriers to racial and gender diversity are widespread and persistent within the educational system, and thus a strong and socially responsible leadership is required to address such issues within the context of a specific educational establishment (Caner et al., 2019).

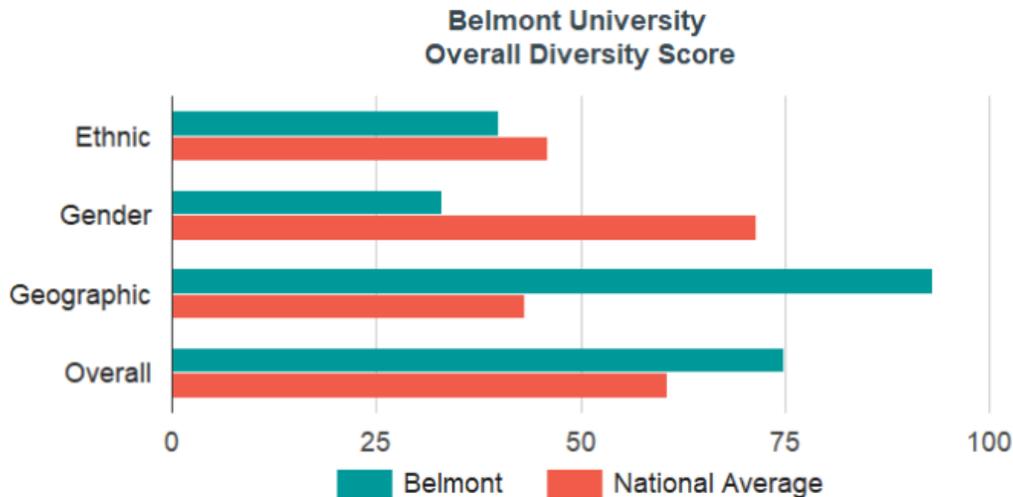


Figure 1. Diversity at Belmont University when compared to the national average (source: Collegefactual, 2020, n. p.)

As demonstrated in Figure 1, one of the serious issues facing the institution is lack of ethnic diversity. More specifically, among the student population a vast majority of the individuals belong to Caucasian ethnic group (79.9%), which is significantly higher when compared to the national average. Another serious concern is that ethnic representation is even more skewed towards Caucasian among the faculty staff (83%). This means that Belmont University's teaching staff is highly homogenous and is mainly represented by Caucasian members. In regards to gender distribution, the university was founded as an institution for women. This legacy has probably contributed to the fact that currently over 63% of its students are female (Collegefactual, 2020). The history of the institution therefore suggests that the observed gender imbalance should not be perceived as a problem for Belmont University.

This evidence strongly suggests that despite the existing governance policies and regulations, Belmont University fails to increase heterogeneity of both its student population and faculty members. As per argument by Lewin (2017), systematic changes and interventions may be required to address this issue and initiate change within the educational institution. One

serious concern is that the current CSR strategy of the university does not address any of the diversity or inclusion issues discussed above. Thus, it is not clear whether the leadership is aware of these challenges facing the university and which strategies will be used to address and reduce the gaps.

Conclusions

This report concludes that Belmont University is one of the largest and fastest growing Southern Christian universities in the United States. Belmont University offers over 130 educational programs and is a four-year university. Programs offered by Belmont can be divided into three groups: (1) undergraduate programs; (2) graduate professional programs; and (3) adult degree programs. The university slowly adjusts its structure and offered curriculum to meet the rapidly changing needs of the U.S. job market, enabling the graduates to be more competitive. A lot of effort is dedicated to address the issues related to governance and code of conduct. One identified concern is that Belmont University remains highly homogenous in terms of ethnicity of its students and faculty members, both heavily skewed towards Caucasian ethnicity. Therefore, it can be argued that the leadership of the establishment has to commit to addressing this inequality concern.

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