



SOUTH LOUISIANA
WETLANDS
Discovery Center



Optimizing the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center's Board

KEYS FOR INCREASED OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS,
COMMUNITY EMBEDDEDNESS, AND LEGITIMACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center (SLWDC) is a nonprofit organization based in the city of Houma, Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, which seeks to educate the community it serves about wetlands habitats, ecology, threats, and sustainability as well as to support and raise awareness of local culture. Comprised of an Executive Director, a small staff of two program managers and a facilitator, and up to fifteen self-appointing board members, this small organization needs to maximize its efficiency and competence to accomplish its mission. I examine the organization through the conceptual framework of Resource Dependency Theory (RDT), which asserts that boards offer specific benefits to organizations including advice, access to supplies and needs, networking with key internal and external partners and legitimacy. The organization seeks to understand how the board can best realize these important benefits. Among its most immediate concerns is the racial homogeneity within the existing board and staff. The lack of diversity on the board and staff does not mirror community demographics, potentially endangering organizational legitimacy and denying the organization opportunities to constrain its dependencies through not being embedded in its environment. Additionally, board members do not currently demonstrate competence in key directorial duties that would allow SLWDC to accrue the benefits accorded to it via RDT, such as increased organizational legitimacy, preferential access to resources, and access to expertise. My research questions for this project were:

1. What types of identities and competencies does the board of SLWDC require to optimize effectiveness and meet SLWDC's needs?
2. What interventions are indicated to close identity or competency gaps on the existing board?

3. What strategies and interventions might be needed to prepare and set expectations for the board and staff regarding pending board changes?

I used a mixed methods approach to gain insight into organizational legitimacy, the types of benefits accrued and missed, and to offer a plan of action to improve on this problem of practice. The specific methodology included a stakeholder survey, a board member survey and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders of the organization. Key stakeholders include an outgoing board president, a local political leader, the organization's executive director, two critical grantors, and civil servants whose work meshes with the mission of SLWDC.

Findings for this project established that SLWDC was not perceived by its stakeholders to fully represent or serve the entire community in which it wishes to be embedded. The SLWDC board, as currently comprised, does not contain enough senior leaders to provide SLWDC the access and advice it needs to flourish nor are there enough identities on the board to provide it organizational legitimacy nor fulfill the board identities or capabilities defined as critical under RDT theory (Hillman et al., 2000; Klarner et al., 2021). These identities include diverse demographic identities, professional identities identified as important for board effectiveness, no expert identities likewise identified as critical for board effectiveness. Further, existing board members do not demonstrate sufficient commitment to the organization in terms of board meeting attendance or in attention to board duties. Lack of commitment was found to be partly due to a dearth of onboarding or board training and development, as well as poor board recruitment practices. Finally, stakeholders identified several potential organizations that could provide SLWDC with a multitude of resources including board members, expertise, access to physical and intellectual resources, synergistic partnerships, and a range of potential funding opportunities.

From research conducted, six recommendations were put forward for SLWDC, linked to the three research questions this study seeks to address, including:

1. Research Question 1: What types of identities and competencies does the board of SLWDC require to optimize effectiveness and meet LDC's needs?
 - a. Recommendation 1: With board input, develop a position description for SLWDC board members from whence board members could be assessed and recruited.
 - b. Recommendation 2: Create, maintain, and promote an organizational diversity statement, and use it as a guiding document.
 - c. Recommendation 3: Replace existing self-appointing board process with board-confirmed nominations.
 - d. Recommendation 4: Develop a board member onboarding program to support firm specific KSAOs.
2. Research Question 2: What interventions are indicated to close identity or competency gaps on the existing board?
 - a. Recommendation 5: Develop an executive training program for board members to address KSAO deficiencies.
3. Research Question 3: What strategies and interventions might be needed to prepare and set expectations for the board and staff regarding pending board changes?
 - a. Recommendation 6: Involve the existing board in finalization of board position description, diversity statements, and strategic and funding planning.

The recommendations provided address the research questions of this project, as well as the deficiencies noted in the existing board. Adopting some or all these recommendations will allow SLWDC to become more embedded, and to have better access to expertise and resources needed to fulfill its mission.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

The South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center (SLWDC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to education and research about the plight of Louisiana's wetlands and their destruction due to climate change, rising sea levels, and saltwater intrusion (Center, 2020). SLWDC facilitates eleven programs designed to inform visitors and students about the beauty, nature and resources of Louisiana's wetlands, the current dangers these lands are facing, and to support research and programs mitigating current and future damage to the wetlands. SLWDC is funded by grants, donations, paid programs, and sponsorships. Funding varies by program type.

SLWDC's most popular programs are educational programs targeted toward children. Its best-known program is the Coastal Classroom, which works to educate K-12 students on the challenges and potential solutions coastal communities like those in Terrebonne Parish face due to coastal land loss and is delivered in several (though not all) public and private elementary schools in Terrebonne Parish. This program is funded through the Greater New Orleans Foundation's Environmental Fund and monies raised via the SLWDC's annual Rougarou Fest (South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center, n.d.).

SLWDC's largest user-paid program is the annual summer Swamp Camp, paid for by camper fees for children between the ages of 9-12. This daily summer camp includes swamp tours, and activities involving native plant use, water quality, fish anatomy, and other topics of interest to children of this age group in coastal communities. Additionally, SLWDC facilitates two federally funded educational programs for teenagers at local junior and senior high schools. Curriculum concerns coastal community resilience in terms of climate change and hurricane recovery.

SLWDC has a small staff consisting of an Executive Director (ED), an Assistant Director, and two program directors. The organization also has a self-appointing board of directors consisting of up to fifteen board members who primarily provide resources in the form of volunteers to assist with the programs but mainly assist with SLWDC's two primary fundraising and cultural events: Rougarou Fest and The Rougarou Ball (South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center, 2020). Thirteen of these board positions were filled at the time this project began in August 2020, though four board members have transitioned off the board since that time. New board appointments are on hold until the completion of this project.

SLWDC's most ambitious project, however, is the ongoing fundraising and construction of its physical facility. The facility will be built in phases, as funding allows. Currently, Phase 1, which consists of an educational pavilion, facility infrastructure and landscaping, and 17,000 square feet of man-made wetlands is underway. Funding for all phases relies primarily on funds raised by the center through its four primary fund-raising activities: The Rougarou Fest (a Cajun culture festival centered on the Rougarou, or Cajun werewolf), The Rougarou Ball (the exclusive highlight of the festival), the Good Earth market (a market of local farmers and providers on the property of the future Discovery Center), and the Ladybug Ball, an upcoming spring festival centered on children (Center, 2020).

AREA OF INQUIRY

The Executive Director (ED) is currently concerned with a significant lack of diversity throughout SLWDC and its programs. While federally funded educational outreach programs reach a somewhat more diverse audience through the local public-school system, the paid programs, and hosted events SLWDC offers are overwhelmingly racially homogenous. Additionally, the Board of Directors and staff are fully racially homogenous. The lack of diversity on both the administrative and customer side has been noted as an item of concern by two primary grantors during annual accountability visits. The ED is concerned that the lack of diversity and inclusion at SLWDC is impacting its offerings and endangering potential fundraising by failing to involve minority sponsors, vendors and participants (LeBherz, Dana M.; Foret, 2020).

Additionally, the existing board lacks the ability or capacity to provide key resources or negotiate access to critical partnerships, sponsorship, and fundraising. Historically, the board has been more a supplier of volunteers or

“boots on the ground” than a supplier of expertise or fundraising connections. While the supply of volunteers and labor is critically important to achieving SLWDC’s

“This is a board where a lot of folks were volunteers and knew each other and became board members. And you can tell that. It’s not a business, but it’s becoming like one, and we need to grow.”

- SLWDC Board Member

objectives, the lack of connections and expertise within the board places an undue burden on the ED to develop fundraising and seek expertise on issues facing the organization outside of the board. Further, as the SLWDC grows, it needs the board to help it build and maintain strategic partnerships that will allow

SLWDC to manage its environment and dependencies. While in the past, board operation and the dynamic between board and ED has been largely successful, it no longer fits a growing and increasingly complex nonprofit.

For these reasons, the ED would like to work on building a more diverse and diversely skilled board who can assist with resource provision and ensure the organization reflects the community in which it operates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In researching for a theoretical framework that addresses the problem of practice, the theories I found offered a compelling and useful lens for examining the problem were Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) and Critical Mass Theory. Much work has been done using RDT as a framework from which to view the organizational effectiveness of boards, the specific roles of board members, and the positive and negative consequences board-led organizations may face should these roles be filled inadequately. Critical Mass Theory speaks specifically to the problem of diversity, adding a complexity to the framework where “appoint a minority board member” not only does not provide the benefits and resources of a diverse board, but descends into damaging tokenism.

RESOURCE DEPENDENCY THEORY

While there are several research theories surrounding the work and function of corporate and non-profit boards, one framework that provides coherence and avenue of inquiry for SLWDC’s problem of practice is Resource Dependency Theory (RDT). One of the most studied and lauded theories in organizational studies, RDT characterizes organizations as open systems that are dependent on external resources and contingencies in their environment (Hillman et al., 2009). In order to ensure continued viability of the organization, a primary task of organizational management is to manage these contingencies and the environmental uncertainty in which the organization operates (Bendickson et al., 2018). Organizations manage contingencies and environmental uncertainty in a number of ways, including “creating bridging ties” between the organization and others who supply the resources, access and legitimacy organizations need (Bendickson et al., 2018). Creating ties or relationships with other

organizations includes such activities as collaborations and joint ventures, as well as by establishing relationships through shared expertise, such as board memberships.

Extensive research on boards of directors have consolidated four types of benefits boards of directors provide organizations within the framework of RDT: advice and counsel, channels for communicating with external entities that may constrain or provide resources, preferential access to commitments, resources and supports from external entities, and legitimacy (Boyd, 1990; Hillman et al., n.d., 2000; Hillman & Dalziel, 2003; Malatesta & Smith, 2014).

Of these four benefits, it is perhaps useful to explicate the concept of organizational legitimacy, as its meaning is perhaps less obvious than the other three. For organizations to survive and sustain themselves, they must seek and maintain organizational legitimacy. Organizational legitimacy occurs when an organization's values and actions align with the values of the larger society in which the organization operates. It lies in the congruence between social values implied by organizational behavior and societal norms (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Herlin goes so far to say that organizational legitimacy is what grants the right of the organization to exist (Herlin, 2015). Organizational legitimacy allows the organization to act in ways and to produce products or services that are have credibility and acceptability within the organization's society (Zhu et al., 2018).

For nonprofit organizations, organizational legitimacy has particular salience. Social acceptability and credibility lead to trust within the community. Nonprofits rely on community trust as they represent the community in which they operate. They cannot represent a community that does not see the organization as a legitimate spokesperson (Guo & Musso, 2007). Additionally, nonprofits who have attained legitimacy can more easily diversify and thus

stabilize their revenue and funding (Zhu et al., 2018), which is a concern of nonprofits in general, and specifically for SLWDC.

Organizations gain legitimacy in one of three ways (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975): they adapt their goals, methods and outputs to prevailing definitions of legitimacy, attempt to alter those definitions to conform to the organization's present practices, or communicate with their constituencies to become identified with symbols, values, or institutions that are already deeply legitimized. Guo and Musso (2007) note that use and communication of symbolic practices is critical for nonprofits, who, due to their mixed stakeholder base and connection with causes that may not be universally valued, have more difficulty with adapting goals and outputs.

SLWDC achieves legitimacy in the first method of legitimization in terms of its goals in through its mission and vision. Its vision to increase awareness of critical needs of and preservation of Louisiana's wetlands (Center, 2020) are at least partly in congruence with wetlands communities in south Louisiana (though perhaps not with the petrochemical industry, those communities' largest employers). What is not in congruence is the composition of the board and the organization's programs, at least in terms of inclusivity. As of 2019, Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, where SLWDC is located, comprises a population that is approximately 71% white, 19% black, 6% Native American, 5% Latino¹ and enjoys a significant Vietnamese population (Bureau, 2019). In contrast, the SLWDC Board has eleven current members identifying as white, and one board member identifying as Hispanic. The ED and all staff members are white. With such a racially and ethnically homogenous board and staff, and with such limited racial and ethnic diversity in its program recipients, donors, funders, and sponsors,

¹ Percentages over 100% as many citizens reported more than one race.

SLWDC does not provide or communicate societal values of inclusion and diversity of all wetland's communities. Lack of inclusion and diversity is endangering its legitimacy, and by extension, support from its stakeholders.

SLWDC could potentially make significant legitimization gains by concentrating on Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) third method of legitimization: gaining identity with symbols, values, and institutions already legitimized. Herlin reminds us that legitimacy must be communicated, including through nonverbal and symbolic ways (Herlin, 2015). Guo and Musso (2007) speak of symbolic representation of community members when the community trusts the organization as its representative. SLWDC can achieve symbolic representation as a means of legitimization as well as adopt inclusive board practices that demonstrate awareness of the community and constituents (Brown, 2002) by making itself visually more representative of its constituent community. A clear symbolic representation is including board members who come from and represent the wetlands communities.

If boards can provide such critical benefits to an organization, how can they be configured and optimized to best allow for benefits to accrue? A first point to consider is that boards themselves are changeable, and that organizations can and should make changes to board size and membership based on the needs of the organization (Hillman et al., 2009; Pfeffer, 1972). Work in this area indicates that the higher the dependency an organization has on its environment, the larger and more expert the board should be (Pfeffer, 1972), and that the expertise, experience, personal attributes and identities of board members should be dictated by the needs of the organization (legal, financial, strategic, etc.; Hillman et al., 2000; Hillman & Dalziel, 2003).

Each individual board member comes to the board with many identities and strengths of identification with each of them (Hillman et al., 2008). The more identities a board can incorporate, the more flexibly it can act and react, the more expertise and advice is available to the organization, and the more status, and thus legitimacy, a board can achieve (Hillman et al., 2008). Understanding these identities and strengths of identification can not only lead to prediction of a board member's efficacy, but can also provide key guidelines on finding, recruiting, and selecting board members with the "right" mix of identities, experiences, expertise, and knowledge to assist the SLWDC with meeting its mission.

Hillman, Cannella, and Paetzold (2000) determined categorizations of director types based on the areas of resource needs they can provide, as well as potential types of directors that might be found within each category, presented here as Table 1. For the purposes of this inquiry, I have included a fourth column for SLWDC-specific information pertinent to each category.

Insiders	Supplies the board with information about the firm itself and about its competitive environment.	Expertise on the firm itself as well as general strategy and direction; specific knowledge in areas such as finance or law.	Current and former officers of the firm.	Executive Director Jonathan Foret fulfills this need.
Business Experts	Best suited to meet the need of expertise in and linkages to critical interdependence in the competitive environment; Provides legitimacy assessed by noting the prestige associated with the director’s work experiences or other affiliations	Expertise on competition, decision-making and problem solving for large firms; Serve as sounding boards for ideas; Provide alternative viewpoints on internal and external problems; Channels of communication between firms; Legitimacy	Current and former senior officers or directors of other large for-profit firms	Specific and local indicators to be identified through interviews and surveys.
Support Specialists	Directors who provide expertise and linkages in specific identifiable areas that support the firm’s strategies but do not form the foundation on which the strategy is built.	Provide specialized expertise on law, banking, insurance, and public relations; channels of communication to large and powerful suppliers or government agencies; Ease access to vital resources such as financial capital and legal support; Legitimacy	Lawyers; Bankers; Insurance company representatives; public relations experts;	
Community Influentials	Directors are symbolic, have experience and linkages relevant to the firm’s environment beyond competitor firms and suppliers; possess knowledge about or influence over important non-business organizations	Provide non-business perspectives on issues, problems, and ideas; Expertise about and influence with powerful groups in the community; Representation of interests outside competitive product or supply markets; Legitimacy	Political leaders; University Faculty; Members of Clergy; Leaders of Social or Community Organizations	

Table 1: Hillman, Cannella, Paetzold (2000)

Research conducted to this point indicates that SLWDC would increase its legitimacy and improve its access to funding and strategic expertise, as well as connections to potential funding by examining its board to determine what types of directors would give it the access, influence, and legitimacy needed.

CRITICAL MASS THEORY

Other identities aside, there are obvious advantages SLWDC could accrue by adding board members with diverse backgrounds. A next area of inquiry, then, might be more specific and more tangible: how many board members should be added? SLWDC should be cautious to avoid the de-legitimizing appearance of tokenism and in setting appropriate expectations of diversity and the accrual of benefits expected.

Adding one board member with a racially or ethnically different background to the board may actually be counterproductive (Bradshaw & Fredette, 2013; Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2019; Kanter, 1977). Not only could this lead to de-legitimizing charges of tokenism, it could result in performance decline due to the potential slowing of decision-making or debate (Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2019). Instead, adding several or proportional diverse membership should allow the board to “achieve a breakthrough, reaching a tipping point or critical mass threshold that seems to unlock performance improvements that seemingly exceed previous expectations” (Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2019). While there is no proven (or even magic) number or proportion, some research has indicated a minimum of three board members or a percentage of minimum 35% (Kanter, 1977; Konrad et al., 2008).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the literature review, I have examined three conceptual frameworks that provide distinct yet related lenses through which to view SLWDC's problem of practice, including Organizational Legitimacy theory, Resource Dependency Theory and Critical Mass theory. I will continue to use these frameworks to explore the following research questions:

1. What types of identities and competencies does the board of SLWDC require to optimize effectiveness and meet SLWDC's needs? (R1)
2. What interventions are indicated to close identity or competency gaps on the existing board? (R2)
3. What strategies and interventions might be needed to prepare and set expectations for the board and staff regarding pending board changes? (R3)

METHODS

The conceptual framework of RDT indicates that board members should be selected to their roles because they incorporate needed identities or have demonstrated expertise or competence in areas that help the organization gain legitimacy, gain access to needed resources, and constrain dependencies. This framework led to the specific research questions listed above. To answer R1, I must determine which identities and competencies are already contained in the existing board members so that I may determine which identities and competencies are lacking and should be acquired. I deployed a board member survey which specifically asked existing

board members to rate their expertise in several community influential, support, and expertise roles suggested by RDT. More details about the board member survey are contained below.

Understanding the identities and competencies SLWDC's board should have, however, will require a deeper understanding of the embeddedness of the organization in the community and the perceptions of critical stakeholders on strengths and areas of growth of the current board. In other words, understanding how SLWDC is perceived in the community will help determine its level of organizational legitimacy, and thus will indicate identity types and competencies to be sought to optimize the board. I designed a Stakeholder Perception survey to determine these perceptions among supporters and volunteers. More details on the Stakeholder Perception survey are presented below.

In-depth, qualitative interviews with critical stakeholders will also provide rich and deep information on the existing board, how it operates, and its strengths and opportunities. The interviews will give clarity, depth, and nuance to the survey results to fully answer R1. More information on the qualitative interviews, including interviewees and scripted questions, is presented below.

R2 concerns competency gaps on the current board. While some gaps will be filled via recruitment of new board members, it is important to know which competency or knowledge/skill/ability/other characteristics (KSAOs) gaps exist in the current board that hinder the board from providing the access, guidance, and expertise to SLWDC that should be afforded to it via RDT. The Board Member survey is designed to answer this question by providing a clear snapshot of current expertise and deficiency in mission critical competence/KSAOs. The qualitative interviews may add depth and richness to knowledge of deficiencies but will not be a primary indicator of skill gaps or deficiencies.

The last research question, R3, concerns interventions that may be needed to prepare the board for changes in process, expectations and duties wrought by board optimization. While related to an understanding of competency/KSAO gaps discussed for R2, this research question seeks to understand needs on a performance management level as opposed to a development level. Are board member contracts needed to set expectations, for example? Will a facilitated discussion to create organizational documents like planning documents or position descriptions be needed to position the board to accept future changes? Understanding what interventions may be needed will be a function of understanding the answers to R1 and R2. For that reason, both surveys and the in-depth interviews will answer the question posed in R3.

In addition to the surveys, a total of eight (8) in-depth interviews were conducted with stakeholders who are more intimately involved with the strategic plans and mission of SLWDC including its executive director, representatives of the grantors with the highest dollar amounts of grant, the outgoing board president, an emeritus board member, two current board members, and local government employee whose work is primarily concerned with wetlands issues, and who has worked with SLWDC in previous and current ventures. The interview questions are contained in Appendix C.

STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

The Stakeholder Survey was deployed in February 2021. A link to this short survey was sent to a social media group of supporters maintained by SLWDC on Facebook. The group contains more than 660 former donors, volunteers, participants and/or clients of SLWDC. Survey questions are designed to probe these stakeholders' perceptions of SLWDC as a community member and resource. The introductory verbiage and survey questions are contained in Appendix A. The six hundred and sixty group members comprise past volunteers, donors, and

supporters of the SLWDC and its various fundraising events, most notably the Rougarou Festival. Reminder posts were deployed after two and four weeks for completion. The survey was closed after four weeks. In total, eighty-six group members completed the survey.

The survey contained six statements with responses arranged on a Likert scale, with a one representing complete disagreement with the statement, and five representing complete agreement with the statement. As mentioned, the statements were designed to understand stakeholder attitudes toward the SLWDC as a community representative and resources, as well as its legitimacy within the community. As the group is comprised of prior and current supporters, volunteers, and donors, results indicating strong agreement with statements asserting SLWDC as a community resources were predicted. The results support this prediction. The survey results, presented below, show strong support for all six value statements, with a mean score ranging from 4.59 to 4.83, and with the standard deviation ranging from .64 to .93. Statistics on each statement are provided in the tables below.

Statement 1: SLWDC adds value to our community by providing excellent learning experiences for children.			
Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
4.8	.64	.41	86

Table 2: Stakeholder Survey Statement 1

Statement 2: SLWDC adds value to our community by providing celebrations of our culture.			
Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count

4.72	.73	.53	86
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Table 3: Stakeholder Survey Statement 2

Statement 3: SLWDC is a resource for the entire community.			
Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
4.59	.83	.68	86

Table 4: Stakeholder Survey Statement 3

Statement 4: SLWDC is instrumental in teaching our community youth about our wetlands.			
Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
4.74	.69	.47	86

Table 5: Stakeholder Survey Statement 4

Statement 5: SLWDC supports community spirit through its events like the Rougarou Fest and Ball.			
Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
4.83	.70	.49	86

Table 6: Stakeholder Survey Statement 5

Statement 6: SLWDC does a great job representing our entire community in its events and celebrations.			
Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count

4.60	.93	.87	86
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Table 7: Stakeholder Survey Statement 6

***Finding 1:** SLWDC is not perceived by some as representing or serving the entire community in which it operates.*

The statements with the lowest mean response and highest standard deviation from the mean were statements three and six. Statement three, SLWDC is a resource for the entire community, had a mean response of 4.59 with a standard deviation of .83. The statement garnered the lowest mean of the six statements with the second highest standard deviation. Statement 6, SLWDC does a great job representing the entire community in its events and celebrations, garnered a mean response of 4.6 with a standard deviation of .93. These results encompassed the second lowest mean and the highest standard deviation. These two statements indicate that, while agreement is generally high amongst stakeholders surveyed that SLWDC is a community resource and asset, there is significantly less agreement that the organization is a resources and asset for every part of the community equally. The low scores indicate that some SLWDC supporters believe that the organization does not represent or serve the entire community.

BOARD MEMBER SURVEY

Board Member Qualifications

A survey of the existing board members was deployed to establish demographic data, professional qualifications, and competencies in the key areas of board effectiveness explored in the literature review including law, finance, public relations, marketing, fundraising and

community knowledge. It was also designed to probe the support board members received from SLWDC, and the opportunities board members had for involvement in SLWDC operations. The introductory verbiage and survey questions are contained in Appendix B. The board member survey was deployed in March 2020 via an email link to existing board members, as well as two emeritus board members who had transitioned off the board during this research. The response rate was 100%. All of the current board members, as well as the two emeritus members completed the survey, though not all respondents answered all questions. No question, however, received fewer than twelve responses, indicating an 86% minimum response rate per question.

Initial analysis of the survey data indicates the board is gender-diverse, professional, and extremely racially homogenous (Caucasian). Of the fourteen respondents, nine were female and five males. Thirteen board members identified themselves as white, and one member identified him/herself as Hispanic. The board was evenly split between those in their first term (1-3 years of service) and those in their second term (3-6 years of service).



Figure 1: SLWDC Board Professions

The board comprises a range of professions with banking and finance and education being most represented. Other professions represented included an attorney, an artist, an engineer, an environmental services (facilities) director, and a salesperson. Of note, five board members are retired (35.71%). Additionally, only five board members (35.71%), are in a senior position in their professional organization. This board make-up indicates that the current board may not be able to provide professional guidance or access to critical resources as indicated by RDT.

Finding 2: *The current SLWDC board is lacking members in senior positions who can provide the benefits of expert advice and access to services and resources.*

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Self-employed	0.00%	0
2	Individual Contributor	14.29%	2
3	Supervisor	7.14%	1
4	Mid-level Manager	7.14%	1
5	Senior Manager/Director/Executive	35.71%	5
6	Retired	35.71%	5
7	Unemployed	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	14

Table 8: Board Member Occupational Level

The board members comprise a variety of professional areas from art to sales as well as other volunteer experience. When considering the four director types indicated in Hillman et al's work (2000), most represented are support specialists, with multiple bankers, an attorney, and some education professionals on the board. Some key support skills, however, are missing, such as communication, marketing, and public relations, as well as logistics, fundraising and

***Finding 3:** The current SLWDC board members do not represent an optimized range of professions to maximize board effectiveness.*

programmatic experts (in SLWDC's case, this would include environmental and coastal restoration experts). More importantly, the business experts, or leaders of other nonprofits with and through whom collaborations, partnerships and synergy may be achieved is lacking, as are any Community Influentials. As will be further explored in the qualitative interviews below, the remaining board members represent seemingly random professional areas that may not have much benefit for SLWDC.

Board Member Commitment, Attitudes, and Participation

The Board Member Survey further revealed a lack of commitment and preparation to participate in an optimized board that positively impacts organizational performance. While 71% of the survey respondents reported being "very" committed to the vision and mission of

***Finding 4:** Commitment of a significant portion of the SLWDC board is lacking. 29% of board members report feeling only "somewhat" committed to the organization. 29% of board members also report attending fewer than 3 board meetings in the past year.*

SLWDC, 29% of respondents reported only being “somewhat” committed to the board. This lack of commitment is further evidenced by poor attendance at board meetings.

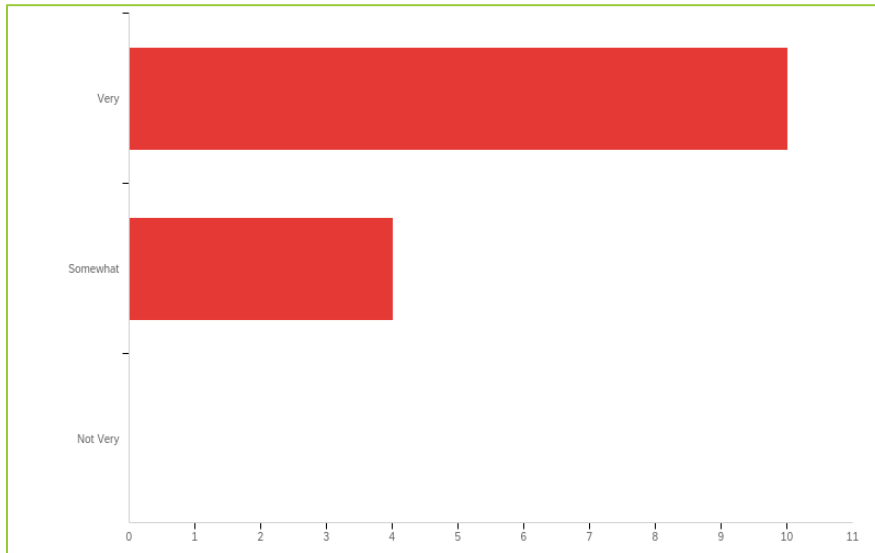


Table 9: Board Member Commitment to SLWDC Mission

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very	14.29%	2
2	Somewhat	71.43%	10
3	Not Very	14.29%	2
	Total	100%	14

Table 10: Board member involvement in SLWDC Activities

Only 35% of respondents reported attending 9-11 board meetings in the past year, while 43% of respondents reported attending fewer than 3. Lack of attendance demonstrates a lack of

commitment to the vision and mission of SLWDC. It is important to remember that two of the respondents were emeritus members. Even removing those answers from the results indicate that 29% of the active board attended fewer than three board meetings in the past year with an additional 7% attending fewer than half of the board meetings.²

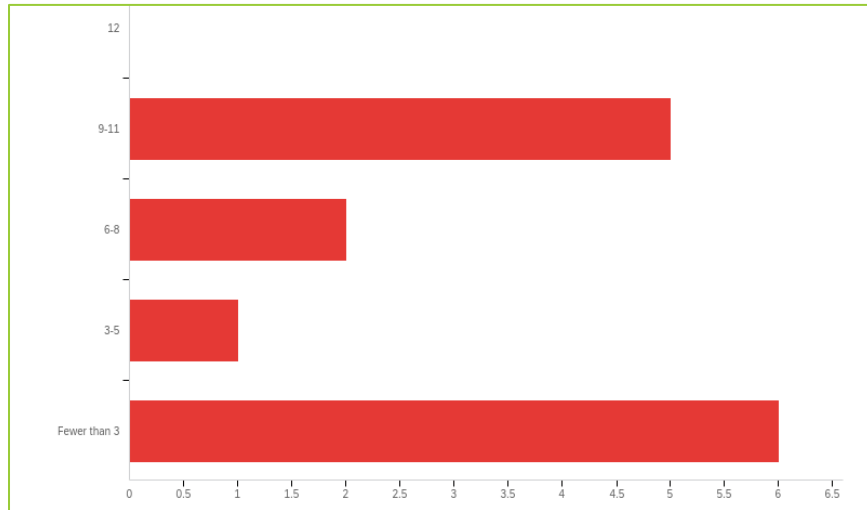


Table 11: Board Member Meeting Attendance 2019

² It is surely important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic may have played a role in some absences. The SLWDC, however, quickly switched to virtual meetings which would have allowed members to safely attend.

Interviews with current and emeritus board members may indicate some reasons for low participation and commitment, but the survey may offer some insight, indicating that 36% of board members received no training or onboarding for their role on the board.

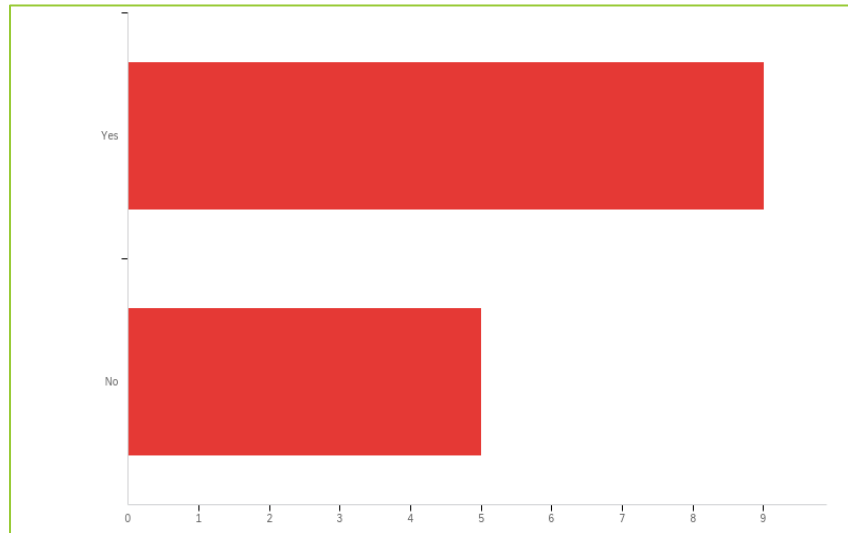


Table 12: Board Onboarding Received

A lack of training and/or onboarding combined with a potential dearth of expertise and experience may be a partial explanation for subpar attendance and commitment of some board members.

The survey also questioned members about board operations, specifically if they were given appropriate tools such as strategic plan to work with, and did they feel they had opportunities to provide input on problems, challenges, and initiatives. Answers for these questions were quite positive, with 86% of board members reporting that enough resources were provided to be effective, and 100% of board members reporting that SLWDC allowed sufficient opportunities for board member input and initiatives.

Board Member Expertise in Critical Support Areas

In consultation with the ED, and founded in the board identity research of Hillman et al (2000), the board member survey asked board members to rate their competency in a number of areas relevant to two of the four board member identities: support specialists, and community influentials.³ The areas of expertise and the number of board members claiming expertise in

***Finding 5:** The SLWDC Board currently lacks expertise in key knowledge areas including personal networking, public relations, marketing, fundraising, and cultural affairs.*

each can be seen in Table 2. Survey results clearly identify critical knowledge areas currently lacking on the SLWDC board that may be impeding or retarding its effectiveness.

Knowledge Area	Number of Experts (of 12 responses)
Organizational Networking	1 (+1 with significant competence)
Personal Networking	0 (+3 with significant competence)
Expertise in Law	0 ⁴
Expertise in Finance	3 (+1 with significant competence)
Expertise in Insurance	1 (+1 with significant competence)
Expertise in Public relations	0 (+1 with significant competence)
Expertise in Marketing	0 (+1 with significant competence)
Expertise in Fundraising	0
Expertise in Logistics	1 (+3 with significant competence)

³ The client was already aware that none of the board members were business experts (in Hillman et al's sense of the word. The Executive Director serves as the fourth board identity: Insider.

⁴ One respondent of 14 identified his/her profession as a lawyer. This board member may have declined to answer this question.

Expertise in the cultural affairs of Terrebonne Parish (cultural life, history, religious connections, etc.)	0 (+1 with significant competence)
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STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

In order to obtain a deeper and richer understanding of the current board and its strengths, weaknesses, and needs for optimization, I conducted eight interviews with organizational stakeholders including the organization’s Executive Director, two emeritus board members, two current board members, representatives of the two grantors who had red-flagged the organization for its lack of diversity, and one local government employee who has and is working with the

Table 13: Current SLWDC Board Expertise organization on some of its programming.

Each interviewee was asked eight scripted questions designed to elicit information pertinent to my three research questions, with relevant follow-up questions as appropriate. The questions are presented below as Table 9:

Scripted Questions for Interviews	
1	What are the strengths of the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center? Follow up: Specifically, board and cultural programs?
2	What are the weaknesses of the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center? Follow up: Specifically, board and cultural programs?
3	From your perspective, how could the SLWDC Board better support the mission of SLWDC?
4	What expertise does SLWDC need that it currently lacks?
5	Is SLWDC embedded in the community in which it serves? How and how not? How could SLWDC improve its relationships with and within the community?

6	From a strategic standpoint, which organizations or collaborative partners should SLWDC approach to better fulfill its mission and increase its legitimacy?
7	In order to optimize the SLWDC board's effectiveness, which characteristics should the board look for in future board members?
8	Other than optimizing board competence and community networking, what other recommendations would you give SLWDC to improve its organizational effectiveness?

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. In addition to review for transcription, I reviewed each interview three times. The first review was for a general understanding of the content. The second review was to identify and code information. I listened a third time to both clarify my coding and to identify rich and informative quotes.

Interview material was coded across four main themes relating to my research questions:

1. Board member identities, competencies, and connections
2. Supporting the Existing Board
3. Closing Competency Gaps within the Existing Board
4. Preparing the Board for Optimization

The first theme, Board member Identities, Competencies, and Connections, included information relevant to understanding the identities, competencies and connections needed for optimal board functioning through the lens of RDT, including community influentials, support specialists, and nonprofit experts, as well as demographic and diverse identities that reflect SLWDC's community.

The second theme coalesced around the performance support pieces and processes the board needed to perform effectively, including such items as onboarding, strategic planning,

budgets and financial information, vision, and mission, etc. The third theme is related to the second theme in that it also supports the board, but more so in the manner of training and development so that board members could better perform (such as networking training to identify and interact with persons with access to resources needed by SLWDC). Finally, any information given regarding preparation needs for the existing board to adjust to changes in board roles and expectations was also coded for adaptation and use in my recommendations to follow.

Identities, Competencies, Connections

The interviews provided an extensive and detailed view of what the interviewees felt were critical identity and competency

needs for the board. The need to diversify identities on the board was often noted, with recommendations of specific types of racial, ethnic, age, and sexual orientation identities

"We have a diversity problem...we are really a group of white folks. Our lack of diversity really doesn't speak to the community. I think it is really important that people see themselves in the organizations that they are working with and that isn't happening right now."

-SLWDC Board Member

to be sought. Interviewees thought that board diversification was necessary for several reasons, including organizational legitimacy.

Other benefits of diversity the interviewees noted also align with RDT. Interviewees spoke of a diverse board bringing diverse programming and diverse and greater funding as well as greater awareness of recognition in, and networks within the community. As one grantor put it, “it’s really easy to be in a bubble and think of the community as a small group when your community is actually way more diverse than that represented in your staff. Representation brings a diversity of ideas.” Another grantor added “Funding diversity can then allow you to have a little bit more freedom in how you create and design your programming, and therefore, who you reach.” Board diversification, then, can create a virtuous cycle, where diverse members bring diverse networks to bear on the contingencies, dependencies, and challenges SLWDC faces, which in turn helps the organization manage the environment and constrain its dependencies.

Specific diversity dimensions within the community that interviewees believed should be sought include racial (African American, Native American, Latinx), age (adding more youth), gender and sexual orientation. Interviewees also mentioned community partnerships for SLWDC to target to increase diversity. A table of these recommendations is included as Table 2.

Organizational Targets for a Diverse Community
NAACP
United Houma Nation
Crown Association at Nicholls State University
SELA Voice Consortium

Table 14: Organizational Targets

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is active in Louisiana, including a local branch in Terrebonne Parish. While all chapters of NAACP seek to support the national organization's vision of minority empowerment and equity (NAACP, 2020), the local chapter elected a board in June 2020 that is focusing on economic equity (Parish, 2021). The five officers are prominent in Terrebonne Parish's African American community, and have, in addition to nonprofit leadership experience, connections to black-owned business of interest such as food providers, street sweepers, etc.

The United Houma Nation advocates for the causes of the Houma tribe of indigenous Americans located in Terrebonne Parish. The organization's mission to preserve Houma culture even when "the land is disappearing under our feet" speaks directly to the mission of SLWDC (Nation, 2021). This organization may provide synergies not only in board members, but in advocacy, programming, and fund raising.

The CROWN (Colonels Retention of Winners Network) Association of Nicholls State University in Houma is a mentorship program geared toward the success of Black men in their first year at Nicholls State University (CROWN Association of Nicholl's University, n.d.). This association pairs mentors from local leadership and business positions with young black mentees to support higher education and success.

South East Louisiana Voice (SELA Voice) is a coalition of community-based and environmental organizations convened by the Greater New Orleans Foundation to provide a collective voice on coastal issues (Foundation, 2021). Comprised of ten unique, local nonprofits, SELA Voice can be a unique resource in providing potential board members or community-based resources to SLWDC.

In addition to diverse identities, the interviewees also identified specific individual and board capabilities to be sought in new board members. These capabilities are either individual or team-based capabilities, or are recognizably part of the four-part typology of Board Governance Capabilities that allow successful boards to organize, build relationships, assess strategic activities and allocate resources (Klarner et al., 2021) in ways that constrain the organizational environment and minimize dependencies. Klarner et al (2021) refer to knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) needed for effective board operations, including foundational KSAOs appropriate to any work team including task-specific and team generic KSAOs (Klarner et al., 2021), as well as KSAOs specific to the organization the board governs. More specific to boards are the organizing, relationship-building, integrating, and reconfiguring KSAOs boards need to optimize the board, the organization and their performance (Klarner et al., 2021). Table 3 describes some of the capabilities interviewees sought and noted were not fully developed or demonstrated on the current board:

Table 15: SLWDC Needed Board Capabilities

Capability Type (Klarner et al., 2021)	Needed Board Capabilities Identified by Interviewees
Task-Specific KSAOs	-regular attendance, participation, shows initiative, can understand SLWDC governing documents (fundraising plans, budgets, strategic plans)
Team Generic KSAOs	-team player, ability to collaborate, good communicator, cooperation, compromise
SLWDC-Specific KSAOs	-environmental knowledge, programming knowledge, educational expertise, coastal recovery
Board Organizing Capabilities (processes boards use to assign directors to specific tasks)	

Board Relationship-Building Capabilities (used to develop productive internal and external working relationships)	-fundraising, networker, community leader
Board Integration Capabilities (assessing strategic activities for fit with mission, monitoring, and allocating resources)	-fundraising, political knowledge
Board Reconfiguration Capabilities (strategic thinking/planning and implementing)	

Interviewees spoke of task-specific and team generic KSAOs as foundational, yet sometimes missing. One interviewee stated it was “obvious” some board members did not understand financial statements and that training was needed for this. Another interviewee advocated for a formal contract that specified minimal items such as reading minutes and attending board meetings. Several interviewees mentioned experiences on other boards of “showboating” board members who liked to “cause drama” merely for attention. These experiences underscored their expressed need for the team generic KSAOs of collaboration, cooperation, and communication. A final set of SLWDC-specific foundational KSAOs were also mentioned, including the need for the board to gain some knowledge in the educational and scientific aspects of the organization’s mission, specifically coastal recovery, and coastal preservation.

Moving up Klarner’s hierarchy of KSAO’s to those more complex board KSAOs of relationship building, integration, and reconfiguration, interviewees recognized the needs for relationship building for specific purposes related to RDT, i.e., access to resources and other funds, access to policymakers and political power were mentioned often. Board members were not as cognizant of organizing capabilities or reconfiguration capabilities of the board, although a couple seemed to be aware of a lack of KSAOs in these areas, stating “[The board] needs more

structure. They get deterred and distracted by little things. They should have a clear plan and a course of action on major tasks, structure of donations...just more specifically targeted plans.”

Final information in this section are the organizational connections future board members should have or at least cultivate. RDT recognizes the dependencies and power over them play in interorganizational relationships. As other organizations have resources that SLWDC needs, they also have a favorable balance of power over SLWDC (Malatesta & Smith, 2014). SLWDC should cultivate partnerships, collaborations, or other synergetic actions with these organizations to build access to needed resources and maintain power balances with these organizations. Some of these connections were mentioned earlier in this paper when discussing building a more diverse board. Additional organizations were mentioned in the context of minimizing dependencies and constraining contingencies, as well as maximizing access to resources. These organizational targets include educational or research organizations where programming resources such as content or instructors might be sourced and shared or developed collaboratively, and corporate or governmental targets which might increase access to funding opportunities. I have categorized these organizational targets as Joint Venture Targets.

One often-mentioned joint venture target is LUMCON, or the Louisiana University Marine Consortium. This organization has physical facilities such as vessels, field stations, and monitoring stations that can provide means for additional programming or enrichment of programming for SLWDC (LUMCON, 2021). LUMCON also has human capital such as researchers, instructors, and academics that can assist or partner in grant writing, program design and program delivery. A well-funded laboratory could assist SLWDC in enriching content and expanding content to older secondary students, college students, or young adults. LUMCON could be a source of interns and research. Finally, LUMCON’s funding position (both private

doners and state funding) put it in an advantageous position to provide access to political and private funders.

In other cases, organizations were considered sources of both program or initiative collaboration and points of funding/resource access. I have categorized these organizational targets as Access Partners. The government liaison interviewed for this project listed private companies such as Apache Minerals and ConocoPhillips as Access Partners in part due to their considerable financial and property assets but also to their desire to “overcome bad publicity” and “improve their image.” Apache Minerals, for example, lists managing 270,000 acres of land “to protect swamps and marshes and the species that call these areas home” (APA, 2021). ConocoPhillips has an even larger presence in Louisiana, owning over 636,000 acres of wetlands (ConocoPhillips, 2021). Both organizations tout their partnerships with coastal restoration agencies, both public and non-profit, offering earthen fill material, land access, and monitoring. Collaborating with either of these organizations would certainly provide preferential access to funding and other resources needed by SLWDC. Table 4 lists the Joint Venture Targets and Access Partners identified by the interviewees.

Table 16: SLWDC Organizational Targets

Joint Venture Targets	Access Partners
Fletcher Community College	Apache Minerals
Nicholls State University	ConocoPhillips
Terrebonne Parish School Board	Terrebonne Economic Development Association
Louisiana Department of Education	Sierra Club
LUMCON (Louisiana University Marine Consortium)	National Center for Atmospheric Resource
Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana	BIPOC Vendors and Chambers of Commerce
Sierra Club	

Finding 6: Interviewees identified several key partnerships that could enhance human capital, provide resources (or access to them), and provide opportunities for synergetic ventures.

The list of joint venture targets and access partners provided via the interviews consolidates a clear list of “targets” for cultivation.

CLOSING THE GAP

In addition to input for characteristics of future board members, interviewees were asked what was needed to support existing board members and close competency gaps that impede the board’s performance. Interviewees noted two primary support areas that would be useful in supporting and closing competency gaps in the existing board: planning and training.

Several board members noted that, due to COVID, strategic planning that would normally occur did not take place in 2020. This left the board treading water and not making headway on any initiatives. But as some interviewees noted, even in normal times, there is a need for more structured strategic planning. The organization has both a 2-year strategic plan and a 2-year funding plan, meaning that each year there is updated planning on one of the plans (LeBherz, 2020). Interviews indicate, however, that board members may not understand enough about planning and the strategic initiatives of the organization to provide input or demand accountability for the strategic plan. Many interviewees commented that the board may rely too much on the ED to design strategy and implement it, and that they, the board members provide

“boots on the ground” to achieve the goals. Table 5 notes evidence from several interviews that indicate this phenomenon.

Quotes from anonymized interviews.
Some board members really [don't] understand what is going on and what is the true focus.
I get the impression [the ED] does everything for everyone.
It's ok not to know, but [board members] should be teachable.
The board needs more structure. They get distracted by little things. They should have a clear plan and course of action.
The ED's been able to attract the people who are helping him to acquire the funding. And you know that's what, in general, that's what boards are supposed to do.
What happens if we lose the ED? If something happens with [ED] the organization needs to live beyond it.
[The board needs something] that really explains what your role is on the board...what your expectations are specifically.

These quotes indicate a need for not only structured and strategic planning, but structured and strategic planning in which clear roles, expectations and deliverables are laid out for board members and staff members.

To articulately and practicably express roles, expectations, and deliverables, however, training on the process and the initiatives could be useful.

It takes cultivating a board to participate in a new way.

SLWDC Grantor

Interviewers note that training, whether in the form of onboarding, regular formal training, or continuous informal training is a form of support and gap closure the board needs. Multiple

interviewees mentioned a need for an onboarding program for the board (also reported in the board member survey) and that regular training on topics such as strategic planning and budgeting would be assist board members in building the KSAOs needed for board governance. Others mentioned mini trainings at each board meeting, even if in the form of a short discussion

Finding 7: Interviewees identified critical onboarding and training needs for the extant board, including financials, strategic planning, and funding.

or exercise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the literary and applied research done on this problem of practice, recommendations for problem resolution are clearly indicated and are directly linked to the research questions. Recommendations are explicated in the paragraphs that follow and are also provided in tabular format as Appendix >>.

Research Question 1 asked: What types of identities and competencies does the board of SLWDC require to optimize effectiveness and meet LDC's needs? The findings outline previously indicate specific identities, competencies and KSAOs needed by SLWDC board members. To recruit and retain board members with the optimal mix of identities, competencies

Recommendation 1: Create and deploy a detailed yet flexible position description in the search for and evaluation of board candidates.

and KSAO's, my first recommendation is to establish a position description that provides detailed information on the desired board member characteristics yet remains flexible enough to be modified as the make-up and needs of the board change. For example, at the time of this writing SLWDC needs board members

with diverse minority identities who have expertise in non-profit leadership, marketing and/or in the political milieu in which SLWDC operates. Future needs may be different, however, requiring flexibility in the position description. A

if you're looking for somebody to serve as your legal advisor in your board, it's great to have an individual person. It's even better to have a firm. Look for, you know, associates of counsel and partners and law firms, because if they're not able to dedicate the time they can at least give it to somebody else within their firm.

SLWDC Grantor

draft position description is attached as Appendix G.

A second recommendation comes forward from the knowledge gained of the different identities, KSAOs and competencies needed on the SLWDC board. To increase relationships with outside entities who may provide benefits to the organization, including organizational legitimacy, SLWDC's board must become more diverse. Recommendation 2, therefore, is to

Recommendation 2: Create, maintain, promote, an organizational diversity statement, and use as a guiding document.

create, maintain, promote, and use as a guiding document, a diversity statement that expresses SLWDC's desire and commitment to welcome and serve diverse constituencies in its vision, mission, and strategies. Pragmatic diversity statements add to organizational legitimacy, specifically if they appeal to the self-interest of stakeholders, recognize interdependencies in the community and demonstrates SLWDC's commitment to act responsibly (Singh & Point, 2021). While a true diversity statement should be co-created by SLWDC leadership and the board to achieve authenticity and buy-in from the existing board (see Recommendation 6 below), an example diversity statement is provided as Appendix H.

A third recommendation following from my first research question is to reconsider the board nomination process. Currently, the SLWDC board is self-appointing. As one board member pointed out in interviews, the result of this process has been friends soliciting friends to

Recommendation 3: Replace existing self-appointing board process with board-confirmed nominations.

serve on the board, which has resulted in the over-homogeneity and lack of needed competence seen in the board at this time. Instead of a fully self-appointing board, I recommend that at least a significant number of board positions become nominated and/or board-approved positions. Target organizations and collaborative partners, the Executive Director, and current board members may be asked to provide nominations in conjunction with the position description and diversity statement. Nominations may then be assessed to ensure new board members are providing the mix of identities, competencies, experiences, and KSAOs needed by SLWDC.

Finally, in order to provide for firm-specific KSAOs (Klarnar et al., 2021) to be developed in new board members, an onboarding program is recommended. The onboarding

Recommendation 4: Develop a board member onboarding program to support firm specific KSAOs.

program should cover the vision, mission, and values of the organizations, roles and expectations of the board, ED, and staff, calendar of major events, and the sharing of strategic and fund-raising plans.

My second research question was: What interventions are indicated to close identity or competency gaps on the existing board? Survey results and interview findings lead to two recommendations directly related to this research question. Recommendation 5 is to establish an executive staff training program to address the competency and KSAO deficiencies on the executive board. The format of this training may take the form of shorter, web-based, or on-

Recommendation 5: Develop an executive training program for board members to address KSAO deficiencies.

demand video training options, or longer facilitated sessions for those topics where considerable technical knowledge is presented so that board members have opportunities for discussion, questions, and coaching. Longer sessions may be part of the annual strategic or funding planning sessions, annual training days, or broken into multi-part sessions to be covered at monthly board meetings.

Board Member Survey results specified a lack of competency in several areas. While expertise is desired in future board members, existing board members would benefit from targeted training in personal and professional networking, basics of fundraising and marketing, social media marketing, and conflict management. Longer, more involved training is indicated in strategic planning, diversity awareness and management, nonprofit budgeting and funding, and improvement science practices.⁵ Additional training on change management will assist the existing board in working through the changes the board will undergo should the recommendations in the project be taken on.

My third research question concerned strategies and interventions needed to prepare and set expectations for the board and staff regarding pending board changes. A need for diversity, equity, and inclusion training, as well as training in change management and nonprofit financials as indicated in Recommendation 5 above will help the existing board transition to new board expectations of board competence and firm specific KSAOs. My final recommendation is to involve the existing board in the changes being made to accommodate board optimization by

⁵ While Improvement Science was not specifically mentioned by the interviewees or survey participants, the practices of systems thinking and cyclical improvement cycles address the needs of the board to see the organization from multiple perspectives, and to learn rapidly.

inviting them to co-create strategic documents such as the board member job description, organizational diversity statement, and strategic and funding plans.

Organizational culture is co-created by the members of that organizational culture (Smith, 2013) through the integration of the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of those within the culture. Similarly, integration of views in the development of organizational products, such as

Recommendation 6: Involve the existing board in finalization of board position description, diversity statements, and strategic and funding planning.

strategic or funding plans, position descriptions or diversity statements, increases shared knowledge and unity of purpose (Ketokivi & Castañer, 2004). Working with the existing board to establish the deliverables recommended will diffuse expectations and knowledge among existing board members, as well as give them opportunities to engage in shared sensemaking and expectation setting.

DISCUSSION

This project aimed to assist SLWDC with optimizing the identities, competencies, KSAO's, and ultimately performance of its board to increase the organization's embeddedness in the community, and to allow it to better manage its external dependencies by increasing access to resources and funding, as well as organizational legitimacy and community support. Three research questions served as a guide to exploring not only the needs of the organization, but strategies used by other organizations to meet those needs. The findings revealed that significant changes needed to be made to the existing board in terms of adding needed identities, competencies and KSAO's to the board, but perhaps more importantly, that strategic and structural improvements needed to be made to ensure continuous improvement at the board level, including the adoption and embedding of strategic documents and onboarding processes.

The recommendations made were based on the results of two quantitative surveys deployed to existing board members and stakeholders and qualitative interviews of selected stakeholders. The Stakeholder Survey was designed to provide insight into stakeholder perceptions of the organization and its place in the community. The Board Member Survey was designed to provide an understanding of the capabilities of the existing board, as well as to understand their level of commitment and their performance support needs. The critical stakeholder interviews provided a rich and deep understanding of the roles of the board and ED, how the board functions, and areas that could be optimized.

Limitations

The understanding of SLWDC's relationship to the community is based on the somewhat limited and perhaps biased perceptions of the survey and interview participants.

Stakeholder survey participants were obtained from a group of previous donors, volunteers, or promoters of SLWDC. It is reasonable to suspect that the views of this group may have a positive bias toward the organization, making it appear more embedded and representative than it actually is.

Similarly, due to COVID and availability restrictions, interviews with all board members and some critical stakeholders were not possible. The limited number of interviews means that the knowledge and understanding gained may also be limited to the perceptions of those interviewed.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study were in line with research exploring RDT in nonprofits. Boards have a critical role to play in the guidance and support of nonprofits. Every board position is an opportunity to provide the organization with the means to sustain itself, embed itself further in the community and to grow. As nonprofits develop and become more complex, boards must continually adapt to provide needed expertise.

The SLWDC board is currently experiencing a period of growth. Where before, self-appointing board members were installed based on being able to provide volunteers at events, the organization has evolved to need more. The ED needs connections and introductions to those with power, funding, and influence on organizational dependencies. The organization needs strategic guidance from experts to guide it through critical growth stages. The recommendations provided will allow SLWDC to position itself to meet these strategic needs, and allow each critical member (board, ED, staff) to concentrate on the specific roles and duties each position requires.

APPENDIX A BOARD MEMBER SURVEY**Skill Survey Questions for Existing Board Members**

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your race?
3. How long have you served on the SLWDC board?
 - a. Less than 1 year
 - b. Between 1- 3 years
 - c. Between 3-6 years
4. Please choose the closest to your current employment:
 - a. Self-employed
 - b. Individual Contributor
 - c. Supervisor
 - d. Mid-level Manager
 - e. Senior Manager/Director/Executive
 - f. Retired
 - g. Unemployed
5. What is your profession/job?
6. Do you volunteer, work with, or support other nonprofit or community organizations?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
7. If you answered YES to number 6, how many other organizations do you volunteer/spend time with?
 - a. 1-3
 - b. 4-6
 - c. More than 6
8. If you answered YES to number 6, please list the organizations you are MOST affiliated with below.
9. How involved are you in the activities of the SLWDC?
 - a. Very
 - b. Somewhat
 - c. Not Very
10. How committed are you to the vision and mission of SLWDC?
 - a. Very
 - b. Somewhat
 - c. Not Very
11. How many board meetings did you attend last year?
 - a. 12
 - b. 9-11
 - c. 6-8

- d. 3-5
- e. Less than 3
- 12. Do you belong to professional organizations?
 - a. Yes
 - b. NO
- 13. If you answered yes to number 12, please list your professional affiliations below.
- 14. Did you receive any training or onboarding for your board position?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- 15. Does SLWDC provide opportunities for board members to provide their input and viewpoints on problems, challenges, or initiatives of SLWDC?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Comments
- 16. Does SLWDC provide the resources you need (training, strategic plan, vision) to be an effective board member?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
- 17. If you answered NO to number 16, please share which resources are lacking.
- 18. Are you willing to participate in a focus group or more in-depth interview regarding SLWDC’s Board and initiatives?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

Please rate each skill, competency, and knowledge area below according to the following scale:

- 1 I am not competent in this area.
- 2 I have a little competence in this area.
- 3 I have some competence in this area.
- 4 I have significant competence in this area.
- 5 I am an expert in this area.

Competency Area	Competency Rating
Organizational Networking (I can connect SLWDC to other organizations and people that can help SLWDC achieve its strategic goals.)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5

Personal Networking (I can connect SLWDC to individuals who are able and willing to participate in SLWDC events as vendors, participants, or volunteers.)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Law	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Finance	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Insurance	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Public Relations	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Marketing	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Fundraising	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Logistics (finding supplies, organizing events, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Strategic Planning	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Governmental/Political Affairs	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
Expertise in Cultural Affairs in Terrebonne Parish (cultural life, history, religious connections, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5

APPENDIX B STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

Stakeholder Perception Survey

Thank you for your support of the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center! We would like to take a moment of your time to better understand your perspective and opinions about the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center. Please click the link below to complete a brief (7 question), anonymous survey:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the survey. For each statement below, choose the answer which is closest to your opinion based on the following scale:

1. I completely disagree.
2. I disagree somewhat.
3. I neither agree nor disagree.
4. I agree somewhat.
5. I completely agree.

Statements about South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center (SLWDC)	Scale of Agreement
SLWDC adds value to our community by providing excellent learning experiences for children.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
SLWDC adds value to our community by providing celebrations of our culture.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
SLWDC is a resource for the entire community.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
SLWDC is instrumental in teaching our community youth about our wetlands.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
SLWDC supports community spirit through its events like The Rougarou Fest and Ball.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
SLWDC does a great job of representing our entire community in its events and celebrations.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**Interview Questions for Grantors, Outgoing Board President and Parish President and Political Leaders**

1. What are the strengths of the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center? Follow up: Specifically, board and cultural programs?
2. What are the weaknesses of the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center? Follow up: Specifically, board and cultural programs?
3. From your perspective, how could the SLWDC Board better support the mission of SLWDC?
4. What expertise does SLWDC need that it currently lacks?
5. Is SLWDC embedded in the community in which it serves? How and how not? How could SLWDC improve its relationships with and within the community?
6. From a strategic standpoint, which organizations or collaborative partners should SLWDC approach to better fulfill its mission and increase its legitimacy?
7. In order to optimize the SLWDC board's effectiveness, which characteristics should the board look for in future board members?
8. Other than optimizing board competence and community networking, what other recommendations would you give SLWDC to improve its organizational effectiveness?

APPENDIX D BOARD MEMBER POSITION DESCRIPTION

Sample Position Description

SLWDC Board Member

The SLWDC Board Member is a volunteer and philanthropic position that provides leadership, guidance, and active support to the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center **as well as connections or networks of needed support or expertise.** Working with other board members and the Executive Director, SLWDC board members provide, sustain, and enrich critical connections and relationships between the SLWDC and its donors, volunteers, supporters, collaborative partners, and the community in which it operates. SLWDC Board Members commit to a three-year term, with the opportunity to renew for a total of six years of service.

FUNCTIONS OF WORK:

- With Board President and other Board Members, directs, advises, and supervises the SLWDC Executive Director including all aspects of employee lifecycle (recruitment, hiring, development, management, succession planning)
- Works, with Executive Director, Board President, and other Board members, to revise, direct, and fulfill SLWDC's mission.
- Prepares and approves SLWDC annual budget, strategic plan, and fund development plan.
- Attends monthly board meetings, annual strategy planning, and other meetings as required.
- Provides SLWDC with advice and counsel in areas of personal and professional expertise.
- Takes an active role in providing SLWDC with volunteers and support for fundraising events,
- Takes an active role as a representative and ambassador of SLWDC's mission, programs, and fundraising with various stakeholders.
- Liaises between and among ED and potential donors, programming experts, collaborative partners, the community, and other stakeholders as appropriate.
- **Provides access either individually, or through networks, to needed services and expertise.**
- **Contributes financially to the organization in "a meaningful way."**

CAPABILITIES, QUALIFICATIONS, SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE:

Board Members should demonstrate mastery of the following capabilities:

- Teamwork and Collaboration
- Values Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Active Learning
- Networking
- Strategic Thinking

Professional experience and expertise desired in at least one of the following knowledge areas*:

- Communications and/or Public Relations
- Marketing

- Education
- DEI Leadership
- Coastal Wetlands Protection and Restoration
- Environmental Justice
- Finance
- Law
- Insurance
- Nonprofit Leadership and Administration
- Public Administration
- Terrebonne Parish historical, cultural or community expert
- Logistics
- Event planning

*Depending on current board composition, certain knowledge areas may be preferred.

APPENDIX H PROJECT PRESENTATION SLIDES



**SOUTH LOUISIANA
WETLANDS**
Discovery Center

South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center

In partnership with Dana LeBherz
Doctoral Candidate
Vanderbilt University

Problem of Practice and Theoretical Frame

- ▶ Lack of Board Diversity
 - ▶ Item of concern in accountability visits
 - ▶ Fundraising efforts
 - ▶ Organizational Legitimacy
- ▶ Theoretical Frame
 - ▶ Resource Dependency Theory



Resource Dependency Theory

- ▶ Organization is an open system
 - ▶ Part of the community
 - ▶ Influenced by the community
 - ▶ Dependent on contingencies
 - ▶ Seeks to minimize/influence contingencies
- ▶ Organizational Boards assist by conferring
 - ▶ Advice and Counsel
 - ▶ Contact/networking for resources and support
 - ▶ Preferential Access
 - ▶ Legitimacy




Board Identities

- ▶ Insiders - Executive Director
- ▶ Business Experts - nonprofit experts, wetlands experts, Terrebonne Parish experts
- ▶ Support Specialists - finance, legal, insurance, marketing
- ▶ Community Influentials - religious, history, political



Research Questions

- ▶ What types of identities and competencies does the board require to optimize effectiveness?
- ▶ What interventions are indicated to close identity or competency gaps on the board?
- ▶ What strategies and interventions might be needed to prepare and set expectations for the board and staff regarding pending changes?



Study Design

- ▶ Boardmember Survey
 - ▶ Does SLWDC provide opportunities for board members to provide their input and viewpoints on problems, challenges or initiatives of SLWDC?
- ▶ Stakeholder Perception Survey
 - ▶ SLWDC is a resource for the entire community.
- ▶ Key Stakeholder Interviews
 - ▶ From a strategic perspective, which organizations or collaborative partners should SLWDC approach?

Stakeholder Perception Survey

Link submitted to SLWDC's Facebook Group consisting of past supporters including volunteers and donors

Group contains roughly 660 people

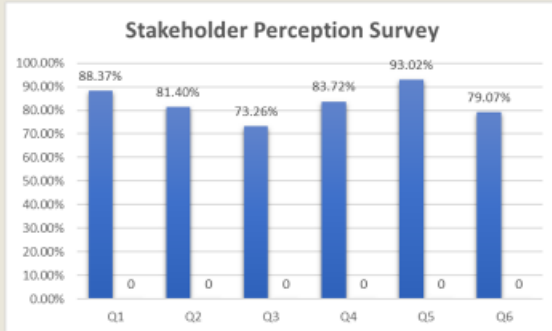
Received 86 responses

Questions

- ▶ SLWDC adds value to our community by providing excellent learning experiences for children.
- ▶ SLWDC adds value to our community by providing celebrations of our culture.
- ▶ SLWDC is a resource for the entire community.
- ▶ SLWDC is instrumental in teaching our community youth about our wetlands.
- ▶ SLWDC supports community spirit through its events like the Rougarou Fest and Ball.
- ▶ SLWDC does a great job of representing our entire community in its events and celebrations.



Stakeholder Perception Survey Results



- ▶ Extremely positive
- ▶ Variation of some scores may indicate need for further community embeddedness




Board Member Survey

- ▶ Half of the board members reported belonging to professional organizations, some of which may be beneficial for SLWDC to explore
 - ▶ Chambers of Commerce
- ▶ Onboarding and Board Training is lacking
 - ▶ 36% of board has received no training or onboarding
- ▶ Expertise in needed skills/competencies
 - ▶ Highest in Finance and Logistics (4 board members are experts or significantly competent)
 - ▶ Lowest in Fundraising, Law, Public Relations, Marketing and Cultural Expertise (one or no experts or highly significantly competent board members)



#	Field	I am not competent in this area.	I have a little competence in this area.	I have some competence in this area.	I have significant competence in this area.	I am an expert in this area.	Total
1	Organizational networking (I can connect SLWDC to other organizations and people that can help SLWDC achieve its strategic goals.)	8.33% 1	0.00% 0	75.00% 9	8.33% 1	8.33% 1	12
2	Personal Networking (I can connect SLWDC to individuals who are able and willing to participate in SLWDC events as vendors, participants, or volunteers.)	0.00% 0	8.33% 1	66.67% 8	25.00% 3	0.00% 0	12
3	Expertise in Law	25.00% 3	58.33% 7	16.67% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	12
4	Expertise in Finance	25.00% 3	33.33% 4	8.33% 1	8.33% 1	25.00% 3	12
5	Expertise in Insurance	33.33% 4	33.33% 4	16.67% 2	8.33% 1	8.33% 1	12
6	Expertise in Public Relations	8.33% 1	58.33% 7	25.00% 3	8.33% 1	0.00% 0	12
7	Expertise in Marketing	33.33% 4	33.33% 4	25.00% 3	8.33% 1	0.00% 0	12
8	Expertise in Fundraising	9.09% 1	27.27% 3	63.64% 7	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11
9	Expertise in Logistics (finding supplies, organizing events, etc.)	8.33% 1	16.67% 2	41.67% 5	25.00% 3	8.33% 1	12
10	Expertise in cultural Affairs in Terrebonne Parish (cultural life, history, religious connections, etc.)	0.00% 0	8.33% 1	83.33% 10	8.33% 1	0.00% 0	12

Interviews



- ▶ 8 Interviews held
 - ▶ Executive Director
 - ▶ 2 Grantors
 - ▶ 2 Emeritus Board Members
 - ▶ 1 Governmental Stakeholder
 - ▶ 2 Existing Board Members
- ▶ Coding
 - ▶ Identities/Competencies/Connections needed for board to optimize effectiveness
 - ▶ Interventions indicated to close identity and competency gaps
 - ▶ Strategies and interventions indicated to prepare existing board and reset expectations
 - ▶ Other

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