

Royel M. Johnson:

Before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples. Panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash, and all indigenous nations, tribes, and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Felecia Commodore:

In 3, 2, 1.

Royel M. Johnson:

Greetings, ASHE family, and welcome back to another episode of the ASHE Presidential Podcast on the purposes, politics and practices of higher education. I am your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, associate professor of Higher Education and Social work at the University of Southern California and director of the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climate. It's a mouthful. And shout out to my colleagues at the Rossier School of Education, specifically my Dean, Pedro Noguera, for being a sponsor for this year's podcast. I have the privilege and honor of working with Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Hi, friends, family, and folks. I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore, an associate professor at Old Dominion University in the higher education and community college programs. We're excited today to embark on another great conversation with great minds as we discuss various elements of the purpose, politics and practice of higher education. Today we have some really great folks who are doing some really great work in various capacities who are visiting with us as we tackle the tricky conversation of higher education governance. So if you know me, you know I'm about as excited as whoever keeps catching Beyonce's glasses at the Renaissance concert. So, I want to know who that person is. Anyway, so let's get to talking about governing and governance.

Royel M. Johnson:

Join us in welcoming our special guest, Dr. Demetri Morgan, who is a tenured associate professor of higher education at Loyola University Chicago, my hometown of Chicago, and also Representative Dr. Harold Love, who is this Tennessee State representative for the 58th District. Thank you all for joining us today.

Demetri Morgan:

What's up fam? It's good to be here.

Rep. Harold Love:

Glad to be here as well.

Felecia Commodore:

So, before we jump into our round table conversation, we have a little fun activity that we do with all of our guests. We call it this or that. We are going to give you two options to choose from and you will simply just pick one, just one that you most prefer. So I'm going to kick it off with you, Demetri. It's been summer sort of, but very hot, but summer. So my question for you is vacation with kids or vacation without kids?

Demetri Morgan:
Without. Without.

Royel M. Johnson:
No question.

Felecia Commodore:
No question.

Demetri Morgan:
It's not a vacation if it's with kids.

Felecia Commodore:
Okay.

Royel M. Johnson:
All right. So Representative Love, we've learned that you are a graduate of both Vanderbilt and TSU. So is it TSU or Vandy?

Rep. Harold Love:
TSU all the way.

Royel M. Johnson:
All the way. We knew that.

Felecia Commodore:
We knew the answer, right?

Royel M. Johnson:
So maybe we'll do all of you offer this one, right? So Purple Rain or 1999?

Felecia Commodore:
Those are Prince albums.

Royel M. Johnson:
Prince albums, by the way.

Rep. Harold Love:
Yeah, I know. I'm a nod Purple Rain just because of the movie aspect also. I mean that soundtrack for that movie, it is special.

Felecia Commodore:
Good stuff.

Demetri Morgan:

I know this is a little controversial, but I got to be truthful. I just got in trouble with my colleagues. I said, "Prince is a little overrated."

Felecia Commodore:

What?

Demetri Morgan:

So I'm going to-

Royel M. Johnson:

You need to leave.

Rep. Harold Love:

Oh, man.

Felecia Commodore:

Demetri! In what way?

Demetri Morgan:

So I'm going to defer to whatever my esteemed colleague Dr. Commodore tells me I should pick.

Felecia Commodore:

Demetri.

Demetri Morgan:

But I'm not sure I have a favorite Prince album and I think he's overrated.

Felecia Commodore:

My heart hurts. I don't even know what to do right now.

Demetri Morgan:

Mark me on record saying this so I can't go back and act like I'm a Prince fan with my colleagues will call me out. So...

Felecia Commodore:

I'll absolutely call you out. I'm going to go because my favorite song is the Beautiful Ones, and that's on the Purple Rain soundtrack. So I'm going to go with Purple Rain.

Demetri Morgan:

All right, I'm going to go with Purple Rain too.

Royel M. Johnson:

Thank you all for indulging us. So we were excited about this conversation today, given the important role that state and institutional governing boards play or should be playing in advancing conversations around equity and society broadly, but in the context for today's conversation, higher education. So in consonance with the theme of this year's conference for ASHE, we wanted to consider the purposes, politics and practices that shape governing boards and their impact on efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. To get the conversation started, will you just tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you are engaged in as it relates to our conversation today?

Demetri Morgan:

I like to say that I happened into my research agenda around governance because I have the opportunity to work with some really great colleagues, Dr. Commodore being one of them, but also Dr. Raquel Rall, Dr. Lucy LePeau. So my interest in governance was sparked when I was in my doctoral program and working with my advisor, really just trying to understand how institutions work, who makes decisions, and how the conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly for some of the most powerful decision makers, it wasn't really on the radar like it was for student affairs, professionals or faculty or student activists.

So my colleagues and I over the last few years have had to try to bridge those two areas of scholarship and practice. And so more recently, we've also spent a lot of time working with boards trying to develop strategies and curricula to provide pathways for trustees and decision makers to better understand their responsibility to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion alongside other campus stakeholders. And so a lot of my work over the last few years has been around that.

Rep. Harold Love:

All right. Well, I serve in the Tennessee General Assembly and specifically the House of Representatives, and this is my 11th year and also my 11th year on the education committee, which covers of course higher education, but also K-12. Over the last maybe six years, we have really done a deep dive into governance issues because we went from a system where there was an overall governing entity called the Tennessee Board of Regents to every college and university that's publicly funded, having their own board of trustees. And so my interest comes from that perspective. Also, my interest comes from having my father have been a legislator prior to me from 1968 to 1994.

Royel M. Johnson:

Oh wow.

Rep. Harold Love:

And my mother working at Tennessee State University for 57 years. So I got to see both sides of higher ed, one from a policy formulation perspective and also carrying out policy.

Felecia Commodore:

So Demetri, as a scholar of governance, for listeners who may not be familiar, can you tell us a little bit about the role and function of governing boards in higher education?

Demetri Morgan:

Yeah, so one of the things that's really tough and why I get so nerdily excited about governance is because the types of governance that exist are similar to the number of ice cream flavors. Like every

state does it slightly differently and in every institution within the state does it slightly differently and then it's always changing as Rep. Love just talked about some of the recent things that are going on in Tennessee. So when we talk overall, ultimately I try to frame it as broad as possible. What's the commonality? When we're talking about boards or governance, we're talking about decision makers, people that have responsibility to make decisions that are in the best interest of their institution. And if they're a public board, they're also hopefully supposed to make decisions that are at the intersection of what's in the best interest of the institution and the best interest of the state.

And so when we go down from there, that then looks very different. You have board level trustees, you have system level trustees in some states. Sometimes they're elected, sometimes they're appointed, sometimes they're self-perpetuating, if they're a private board, meaning that the board themselves picks the next trustees. So there's a wide variety, and one of the reasons I always try to get younger scholars, so if there're younger scholars out there, it is such a great field because there's so much work and there's so much that we don't know. But at a high level, those are kind of some of the introductory things that I try to point out to help kind of alert us to when we're talking about boards or governance, what are some of the things we mean?

Royel M. Johnson:

So I was excited about this conversation today because we've seen such an increase in attention to the role of states and their involvement with public higher education institutions. We're in an interesting social political moment, especially as it relates to conversations around DEI. Rep. Love, can you talk a little bit about what you've observed as some of the major issues and conversations happening at the state level regarding higher ed?

Rep. Harold Love:

Absolutely. Particularly around the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. What we found was that our system that was put in place with each school having a board of trustees for their own, the persons on that board were appointed or recommended by the governor, but then confirmed by the general assembly, which gave some balance to the appointment process, but also opened those persons who appointed up to being questioned at some level. Some of us felt very unfairly, very specifically this past session, what we found was persons who're up for reappointment and some up for new appointments were consistently questioned about the DEI policies at the universities. It almost became a common theme that without fail we could predict countdown 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. It comes a question, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Rep. Harold Love:

And what we found was many of the board members responded correctly by saying, "Listen, our job is to hire the executive. Our job is to deal with if there are tenure issues brought to us when it comes to guiding the rules of tenure, then we weigh in. But we're not dealing with the admission policies, we're not dealing with these other issues of hiring based on diversity. We hire one person." And it seemed as if this was something that colleagues felt was important to discuss, but we saw it as almost an abuse of the opportunity we had to really ask the trustees who propose, how will you help guide the work of your institution? How will you help make sure that your institution is going the right direction when it comes to educating and graduating students and getting funding properly from the state government?

So this became a thing that we also saw playing out at other states. So we saw was this commonality of these questions floating from various states to other states where it was being mimicked and copied, which became very disruptive I think, to the process of the interview. And to the point that there was a statement being made that diversity was not good and that inclusion was not good and that equity was bad.

Felecia Commodore:

Wow, that's so interesting too. And I think you bring up a good point that I know me and Demetri have experienced in having conversations with boards around their role in addressing inequities in their institutions and things like that of this fine line between engaging in the work of the board, but also overstepping or overreaching and getting into the weeds into spaces that really board members are not supposed to be getting into, which is the day-to-day operations work of an institution. And so Demetri, I wanted to ask you in that vein, what policies and practices of governing boards promote or inhibit institutional efforts to advance equity and what are the challenges around that?

Demetri Morgan:

Yeah. So I mean, I could go on and take up all of our time, but one of the ones that we're seeing often that inhibit or provide an obstacle is that there's not really clear training or onboarding for trustees. And so what does it take to be a trustee? When we have teachers or doctors or accountants, there's an understanding, there's training, there are exams that go into certifying or qualifying someone as a good so-and-so. For trustees, more or less it's vibes. What makes a good trustee? Well, it depends on, it's in the eye of the beholder, if they donated to the right political party, if they're well connected and in circles. And so that creates a challenge because the expectation then of what people are supposed to be doing and their understanding of what they're supposed to be doing. For some people, they're going to come in and maybe they sit on a corporate board or maybe they sit on another nonprofit board and think it's going to be exactly the same for higher education.

And in some ways it is, but in a lot of ways it's very different and it's its own distinct beast. And so we see a lot of challenges with that. How do we not demean your prior military experience and understand the assets that in the boardroom, in the higher education boardroom, what that could mean, but also say, "Hey, but it's not the military or it's not, insert big nonprofit, or it's definitely not, insert corporate board that you also sit on." How do we take some of those experiences, cultivate it and then translate it into this context?

And then when you come to DEI conversations that we'll say baggage, it has to then be cultivated by someone that understands, and often it's the chief executive or the president, but there's also a lot of other players that are interfacing with the board, whether it be the chief diversity officer. We've seen some work around that as well as board professionals. It's one of the things we've been talking about a lot recently. The people that are managing the board have big insight into how to get board members from point A to point B around some of the DEI work. And so that's probably one of the main ones.

And I bring it up too, because it's also one of the things that is most fixable, like how we train and onboard trustees is something that could be something that many boards work on, but it continually gets overlooked. And so we highlight that often because it's a good place to start. We're not going to be able to change everybody's hearts and minds, but the expectation we have for them when they get to the boardroom and how they get on the board and what they're learning and the development that they go through is a conversation that I think a lot of boards could have if they were willing to focus in specifically on that piece of the experience.

Felecia Commodore:

It's really interesting. I think of a quote from many of our dear friends, Dr. Dr. Tykeia Robinson, where she talks... We had a conversation and she was saying that we make a lot of assumptions in higher education that people who are... because of the positions they're in, they actually know how to lead, but a lot of times they don't know how to lead. And I think the same can be said for board members sometimes. I think there's this assumption that because of their position, whether it's in the community, whether it's on other boards, whether it's in within certain companies or corporations, that they know how to be board members.

Royel M. Johnson:

You mean they didn't get their by their merit?

Felecia Commodore:

Their little board badge. So yeah, so we make these a lot of assumptions and I know Demetri, the work we do, a lot of board members are like, "I had no idea what I was doing for at least a year." And so I think that's a really important point.

Demetri Morgan:

The other part that's really challenging is that when you look up the dictionary definition or the textbook definition, trustees are supposed to be fiduciaries of their institution. Often people sort of think about, okay, they're supposed to manage the money and manage the facilities and make sure things are well working. But the other piece that sometimes gets overlooked is that boards are also supposed to safeguard the reputation and the intangible assets of an institution.

And that's also what gets really tricky in some of these conversations because things that I might do that I think are going to enhance the reputation of my institution, which for example might mean making the pathway into my institution more accessible to minoritized individuals, another person across the aisle or across the way is going to look at that and say, "Well, you're watering down," that we just saw in Clarence Thomas's defense, the mismatch theory or watering down, people shouldn't be at these types of institutions.

And so that intangible asset of the institution and how trustees and boards are safeguarding the reputation of the university is also really tricky when it comes to DEI because of how polarizing a topic is like Royel was speaking to.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, so thinking about that and thinking about various, like board composition and how various interests and perspectives and values can find its way into the boardroom and the decision-making process, Representative Love you brought up earlier, and I'd like to hear more about your experiences with this or your reflections. The State of Tennessee decided to move from a state level governing board to having institutions have their own boards. And I would like to know a little bit more about that and kind of how that came to be and then what did that actually look like when it started to play out?

Rep. Harold Love:

Well, what we had was one institution governing all of our colleges. And because of that, the financial requests of every institution was being meted out by that one governing body. So if a college in Memphis, Tennessee wanted to have a new building, they were put on a rotation schedule with all the

other colleges in Nashville and Chattanooga and Knoxville and other parts of the state. There were some who believed that that process hindered them from really flexing their political muscles. But if they were to have their own governance board, then in addition to selecting the chief executive, that board might be able to also influence the state budgetary process.

So now instead of one institution governing not just the operations but also the financial request of all the colleges and putting them on a rotating schedule again for new buildings, what you then had was five or six or seven or eight different boards with different kind of board members that have different political connections now being able to say, "Hey, the university on whose board I sit, we really need this new building. And I know that there's traditionally been this method of going ahead and having this schedule be fair. We really could use this because this is what we're going into." And that became what we saw was the real reason behind it, which was to give all these institutions a chance to stake their own claim.

Which in the long run, I thought that it was going to be a hindrance for Tennessee State, which was the only publicly funded Black college in Tennessee, the only public HBCU, because then you'd be competing against other institutions and there was no mediator in the room. And so we found that to be a difficulty that we had to overcome with that piece. And I think that's what was the genesis behind it and to the point earlier made that these board members, because of their political connection, sometimes were able to move things a lot faster and get a lot of things more done easier than they were up under other institution governing them.

Felecia Commodore:

Right?

Rep. Harold Love:

And so now what we found is now to your point earlier, a lot of these new members had never been boards of a higher education institution. And so they had to think about, well, what does it mean to have a robust scholarship program that does reach out to different groups that have been desperately impacted by other entrance policies for many years and decades? What does it mean for us to really have a dedicated, robust diversity program for hiring faculty?

Royel M. Johnson:

Absolutely.

Rep. Harold Love:

And what does it mean for us to talk about what tenure looks like at our institution? And so that became, I think for the new boards because the institutions didn't get new boards until 2016, so they're all relatively new. Some had terms of two years, three years and six years, and so they're now getting those new members in there.

Royel M. Johnson:

I'm glad you mentioned that last point because one of the concerns around the recent affirmative action decision is the chilling effect that this is going to have on other efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. And I think governance and board trustees have a role to play in helping folks sort of interpret the law and staying within the bounds of it and not overreaching in the ways in which some states and

institutions already are doing away, or having conversations about doing away with scholarships that are race-based and so forth.

I was glad that we were having this conversation today because I think folks see governance as so distant from their realities, but in fact, governance has really clear implications for the material realities of folks. What do you say to... What recommendations rather do you have for folks who are getting more engaged and involved in governing boards, whether it's at the state legislator or whether it's at the institution level?

Rep. Harold Love:

I would recommend that many persons who are interested in being on governance boards need to look for opportunities in their local community. It is nothing like being on the board, for instance, of a private pre-K, a daycare in your community because those same challenges you might find with a higher education institution. You're dealing with curriculum, you're dealing with fundraising, you're dealing with issues around safety and security and dealing with also the rules and regulations of that state agency that determines the rules and regulations of daycares. And that gives them some experience to understand what that means to have, as we say, you have one employee and that's the chief executive. Now, all the other employees you maybe can influence their hiring and firing and other things around them, the personnel committee that deals with that. But you essentially have one employee, and it's hard sometimes for board members to get that understanding.

But if you start at this smaller level, I think you'll find yourself able to do that. And that was actually one of the concerns I had when we went to the board system. Not that we didn't have enough qualified African-Americans who had board experience, but the many times those African-Americans who were given the opportunities to be on boards were being used so many times that they were almost burnt out from being on a board. And so they might turn down the chance to be on Tennessee State's board and they've been on someone else's board. So to get a new crop of people in, you have to have a training module that doesn't just involve the six months after they're on the board, but it involves them actually being on a smaller board and working out those issues with them.

Felecia Commodore:

I just got really excited, because I think one of the things we wrestle with, especially when we're talking about board composition and how do we diversify boards, is how do we get people in the pipeline to be on governing boards? And I don't know that I ever thought about encouraging people to be on these more smaller community-based boards first to kind of-

Royel M. Johnson:

Like a socialization?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, to kind of learn what it means and in a community centered way. So not in a corporate or performative way, but really learning how to do these things or make these decisions that impact people in communities in a similar kind of fashion that it happens in higher education. I think that's really great.

Rep. Harold Love:

If I can add this also, I think we oftentimes overlook... People who want to be in office oftentimes overlook the boards at state level. I was on a board for the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth before I got elected, and it got to show me all the issues dealing with juveniles. So what happens oftentimes, people disregard the vacancies that are on state level boards or even local city boards because we don't think that that's the power, right, to be on the parking board, to be on the beautification board. But you have to learn board culture.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Rep. Harold Love:

That's also a way to be put in that pipeline.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes. No, that's really great. And shout out to anything parking because I'm on the Parking Re-appeals Committee at-

Rep. Harold Love:

You're on the parking...

Felecia Commodore:

NEU. It's the best committee ever. So shout out to the Parking Re-appeals Committee. Demetri, I think you were trying to...

Demetri Morgan:

Yeah. No, I was just going to say too, the other thing that this part of the conversation brings up for me is I think sometimes people are like, "Ooh, politics. I want to be involved in governance. I want to be a leader, but the politics." And I think often we think of more recently like House of Cards or just the deal making. And in some ways boards do that as most groups, but there're also intermediaries between institutions and elected officials or the governor. And so it's a really interesting position to sit in and to learn the ongoings of a state. And so both from people that might be interested in studying or layering in boards in their scholarship, but also finding avenues and pathways to be on boards. I think it's a really great conversation and something that we don't usually advertise or talk about. So I got excited too because I'm like, "Yeah, why not more ASHE members on boards?" That would be an awesome thing.

Felecia Commodore:

I did have a question. I might be taking us back a bit because it doesn't look that way because I have my Terry Gross for this one and everything, but I'm very, very excited about the things that are being discussed. So Representative Love, you're talking about making this transition again, right, from this one entity, governance entity to the individual institutions. So Demetri knows this, Royel knows this, I'm really big about policies and governing documents, and so I'm intrigued if you have any insight. And so how did you all manage that process of, you talk about term limits and how these boards were going to work. I imagine they had to come up with institutional level policies around their boards. So was that a process that became tricky or did you have any insight to how they actually came up with bylaws and things like that?

Rep. Harold Love:

The benefit that we did have is that we already had, again, the Tennessee Board of Regents that was already managing a good chunk of our college and universities. The University Tennessee system was managing the other ones. And so we just took the language of the legislation that gave those other entities their power and just simply transferred it to the individual school level board.

Felecia Commodore:

That makes sense.

Rep. Harold Love:

Again, things like tenure policy, things about admission policy. There was one clause in there that said, as we were dealing with whether persons who were not born in the United States but were then located in the United States who were not full citizens, were allowed to go to K-12 institutions and be treated just like regular citizens. But the issue then became what about their in-state tuition for Tennessee? These students were charged out-of-state tuition because they were not US citizens yet, but there was a clause in the bylaws and the legal language forming the institution's board that allow them to set their own policy for admissions, would allow them to say, a student who lives within 250 miles of the school can get in-state tuition.

And so that was already in law, but we transferred essentially that language to each individual board. And so it allowed us to explain to alumni of these institutions and say, if you know how the Tennessee Board of Regents worked, then what you're essentially getting is your own Tennessee Board of Regents. If that's how that worked, you're getting your own institutions. So now we'll tell you one challenge that came up is the thing about sunset hearings, because with all institutions formed by the state, they have a sunrise when they're created and a sunset. Departments can be closed down. And so the shocker for many TSU alums was when TSU had its first sunset hearing and people went crazy, "Oh, they're going to close the school down." We said, "No, no, no. This is the process." No, the sunset hearing. I said, "Yeah, but the issue is we never had a sunset hearing because we never had our own governing board."

Felecia Commodore:

Yes, yes, yes.

Rep. Harold Love:

Right? The sunset was always for the Tennessee Board of Regents, but now that we have our own governing board, then the governing board has to come before the general assembly every year and answer questions. What's going on with your enrollment? How is your housing? How are your scholarships? How are your financials? Tell us what you're recommending to fix these things? And so that became a mechanism that people had to get used to also was recognizing that we would have to come every year now as the institution and testify.

Felecia Commodore:

No, that's really great. I'm like a kid in a candy store right now. So with that, thinking about that, and as you talked about these institutions now having to come before the state legislatures, the general assembly and answer these questions about their vitality and all of these things, one of the things I know me and Demetri and other governance scholars discuss is the challenge with holding boards accountable, right? There's not really a mechanism for that. And so as a state legislature Representative

Love, I'm curious from your vantage point, how can folks hold state legislature, state level governing boards or even their institutional boards accountable to the institutions, particularly public institutions?

Rep. Harold Love:

Well, from a state level perspective, one way we hold them accountable is with legislation because those board members have to be reappointed or someone will be appointed in their position. Legislation also allows us to vacate the board if we see the board as a whole is not doing what they're supposed to be doing to be good fiscal agents. Because think about it from this perspective, at the end of the day, these boards are an extension of the government because if they're public institutions, then those are public buildings that the students are being housed. Those are public buildings that the students are learning in. The professors and the staff members are state employees essentially.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Rep. Harold Love:

And so when the school receives state funds or taxpayer funds, then there is a fiscal and fiduciary responsibility that the board has to manage those funds properly and or hire someone rather to manage those funds properly. And if they found the person not doing that, they have to hold that person accountable. If they don't hold the person accountable, then we have to hold them accountable for not holding the person accountable. We have to say, "Listen, how do you not spend the money properly?" These are not just tax dollars, but these are parents who have paid because there can be an argument made that if the state is in the business of providing education, the education is the good we're providing. It's the good that we're selling. And so if that good is faulty, if that good is not the best it can be, then the consumer i.e., the student and or their parent has a right to complain and say, "I didn't get a good product, and the manager on duty that day did nothing to help."

Royel M. Johnson:

So what are the levers? Are there levers available for vacating a board, like if the public-

Rep. Harold Love:

Yes, legislation.

Royel M. Johnson:

Legislation, if the public has concerns around their confidence in the board, how do they sort of raise that to the state legislator or what would be a route for doing that?

Rep. Harold Love:

Yes. And here is the good but scary part about legislation. As I tell folks, government brackets your life from beginning to end, from death certificate and birth certificate, right? We are engaged from the very beginning to end. And so in the same vein, because the state government created these entities, they also created these boards. And the state government can legislatively vacate the board. Like our department or our committee is called government operations, and they have the duty to review all entities in government to see if they're functioning properly. And we have vacated and we have sunset, other commissions and boards, not higher ed, but other commissions and board in the state.

And so in the worst case scenario, what you would find is a vacating of the board and then replacing that board with new board members. And actually, I'm really speaking about this from a very difficult situation we had with Tennessee State Justice past Thursday session where there was some concerns about board governance and a few of my colleagues wanted to vacate the entire board. And so we had to put in place say, "Hey, listen, don't do that. If you've got issues with a board member, let's have a conversation. But you can't wholesale vacate the entire board and replace them in one session because that's just reckless."

Demetri Morgan:

And we saw it happen though in a very different sort of version in Florida where Governor DeSantis went into new college sort of essentially let go, all of that. And so part of me, I've been vibing with everything Rep. Love has been saying, but then sort of got tense because when we talk about political intrusion and the way it can be wielded in various ways, depending on the sort of benevolence and skill of the elected official, it can get tricky really, really, really quickly. And thankfully, in Tennessee at least, there were some safeguards. It's like, yeah, let's have a conversation before we take some of these things. But in other states, we're not seeing that. And it's really hard to sort of go back once you sort of set a precedent of, "Hey, we're going to be willing to totally get rid of the board and only appoint people who are ideologically aligned with us."

And we're seeing that in the laboratory of the states right now. And I think watching the different approaches is going to be really important because I think it's too early to tell what those outcomes will be. But if we're not watching, then some of these things continue to happen and if there are wrongs that are being perpetuated even more so and we don't locate or implicate the board in how some of these things are playing out in certain states like Florida, then it gets tricky to hold people accountable on that end of things for those types of decisions.

Felecia Commodore:

And this is one of the things that, again, back to me being enamored around policies and governing documents and things is because I think a lot of times we don't... As advocates and stakeholders in higher education, particularly with our public institutions, we really don't know the processes and the policies and all of these things that go into not just how people get on boards, but how do we vacate boards or how do we hold boards accountable or what is even the sunset process? These are things we don't really think to look into. And it's also something I always argue that we don't talk about these things around election time. So we elect these legislators into office on the state level, but we very rarely ask them questions about how they would approach governing boards, how they approach higher education governance?

We've just recently started seeing how people felt about funding higher education. But these state legislatures play this really strong important intermediary role in what happens with boards and what happens with our governing boards at our public institutions. And so this is me getting on my soapbox. I have many soapboxes for the podcast, with saying that we need to have this conversation more when we're electing these state legislators to know where they stand on these things and make sure it aligns with our values and what we believe should be happening and how our institution should be managed.

Rep. Harold Love:

Tennessee State is one of 19 Black land grant institutions, and historically they've been underfunded-

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Rep. Harold Love:

... compared to their counterparts. One of my biggest achievements in the legislature was to lead a committee and discovered Tennessee State was underfunded by \$544 million by the State of Tennessee, and we recouped about 350 million of dollars of that, thankfully. But the issue is this, all across the South, you have governing boards who I would think would ask that very same question to say... And this is a way to also to a degree protect your president because sometimes the president can't ask these questions. The president cannot make these suggestions because it comes off the wrong way. But this is the point that the board can make because again, the board is not being paid. The board is there to stand in the gap for the president and the institution.

The board could very well say to the governor and the legislature of any state in which their school is situated and say, "Hey, I'm on the board of Florida A&M. I'm on the board of South Carolina State, right? I'm on the board of Alabama A&M, and I'd like to know, has this school been underfunded by this particular state since our inception? And if so, what are the mechanism we're going to employ to remedy that? Because as a board member, not only do I have a financial responsibility to this institution, but I also have a responsibility to the reputation."

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Rep. Harold Love:

"To be able to say, if we have buildings that are in disrepair and it's because of underfunding, I have an obligation on behalf of the students and the faculty and the parents of this institution to fight for this institution because the president doesn't need to be doing that. I need to be doing that."

Felecia Commodore:

Right, right. I love it.

Royel M. Johnson:

So ASHE is an association committed to the creation and dissemination of academic research on higher ed. And I know Felecia and Demetri contribute to a lot of our understanding of good governance practices via research through their experiences in studying governing boards. How do we tighten that connection between research and practice? So what we know works from a scholarship perspective to what boards actually do on the grounds to support their institutions?

Demetri Morgan:

One of the things that I always say to both colleagues and emerging scholars, graduate students is in any paper, in any report that you're writing, there's always implications for future research and practice. And I can count on both hands the amount of times that I've seen governing boards implicated in those implications. We always have implications for the president or the chief diversity officer or faculty or student affairs professionals, the vice president of student affairs, all the way down, up and down the ladder, but the board never gets called out.

And so one of the things that I think we all can do as an association is say, what are the implications for, insert scholarship, for the board? And who might be the vehicle to get this information to the board?

Who might be the one who if translated and likely put into a one-page memo, could take some of these insights to the board about best practices around admissions or faculty tenure and promotion or so on and so forth? And so I think we do a really good job of thinking about praxis, but then we don't translate it to all the audiences that could potentially benefit from the insights that we have. So that's always a key one. It's like how are you translating your scholarship for the board and then also thinking the avenue for it.

And then the second piece is including boards in studies. So when we're doing organizational change scholarship or we're thinking about leadership and decision making usually stops at the president, and why not include board members? Why not include state representatives who are on committees and councils that interface with or oversee the board? And so it's both a methodological thing for me too where we think about our participants and who A, we think very campus specific, which on the one hand is good and fine and makes sense, but if we opened the aperture a little bit and said, these other entities, the board, the state representative, are also deeply impacting student experiences in a variety of way, we should also include them in our study. I think we'll generate insights that then can circle back into this pipeline that'll inform what trustees are doing. And so a both end approach that I think is really important.

Rep. Harold Love:

If I may add to that point also, I think there's a role for the research to play to educate legislators. Let's be very clear about something. Just as many board members are new to that, many legislators are new to legislating. Not all state representatives and senators come from a metro council or city government and move up. Many person, this was my first experience in public office, and so thankfully I had the experience of my father being in office to give me a little bit of heads up. But still, it's different being in the seat because now you are the government, you're governing, and these are state institutions. And so to have some type of research that one can look to to foster that support.

I would also suggest that there's partnership opportunities with other entities at a national level to provide opportunities for research dissemination. So for example, what does it look like? The plug in here now for the National Black Caucus of state and legislators, what does it look like for us to, at one of our annual legislative conferences, to have someone from ASHE to come and present on board governance, right? On-

Felecia Commodore:

Let's take a little note right here.

Rep. Harold Love:

... operations, right? As President elect, I'm putting this plug in for you, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, yeah. I'm taking notes. I'm over here taking notes!

Rep. Harold Love:

What happens? Many of the legislators have colleges in their district. I got five in my district. I got TSU, Fisk, Meharry, American Baptist College, Tennessee State, Trevecca Nazarene College. And so I have public and private, and so it would allow us as legislators to also have the experience. Secondly, it would

expose you to persons who aren't in the legislative space but are on the other side of lobbying. Now this becomes also-

Felecia Commodore:

That's really important.

Rep. Harold Love:

... a good pool to draw from for those who might be board members, but also need a tip on how to do good governance in that way.

Demetri Morgan:

Yeah, that's so important because one of the things, and one of the reasons why I enjoy working with Dr. Commodore, I don't think about the sort of political networks and the connecting that is so critical to, in a lot of ways, the bread and butter to building connections, information sharing. I know it from a theoretical and research perspective, but the actual practice of it makes my skin crawl sometimes. And so I have colleagues who live and breathe it. But it's so important because when you do then build those relationships and information can be passed not just in formal ways, but also informally at drinks after the webinar or after the session when things... Also when information also gets shared in those more informal ways, but people are able to hear differently or things are put in maybe a more candid fashion, are also critical to actually the change process. And so I think those networking opportunities, which sometimes get a bad rap, but bringing different groups together and different people together can be really rich sometimes. So it's a great reminder.

Felecia Commodore:

And that was... Again, I was taking notes of here. I might be emailing you later, but-

Demetri Morgan:

Some takeaways.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I think that's really helpful. And I think one of the challenges, and Demetri knows I'm a pragmatist at heart, so I'm always like, "Okay, what are we doing with this though? How can people apply this to what they're doing?" And I think it's to me, been really important getting work to the people that can help implement the work or can learn from it and also teach us. I think some of the work we've done, we have been able to do with boards. We've learned like, okay, maybe we need to shift how we think about this because we are actually hearing from board members, it's a little more complicated than it may look on paper.

But I think that what you described, I think has been a challenge for some governance scholars to break through that gate because we are seen as academicians or heady book people. And so how we get into those spaces where we can connect with the legislators and connect with the lobbyists and the board members, but you bringing up those different opportunities and partnering with already existing kind of associations or caucuses and things like that is really, really, really helpful. And I think it's really important that we get this work. Again, I mentioned this earlier, we talk to ourselves a lot and I think as scholars, especially in higher education, because it touches so many people in so many communities that we have to do better with getting out of the ivory tower, getting out in the community and having

dialogue with those who are also stakeholders in higher education, and particularly in the area of governance.

Demetri Morgan:

The only wrench I'll throw in this is, and I wanted to say this after Rev. Love shared, but the challenge is similar to how people feel about their Congress person. And I feel it's similar about higher education institutions. People love their institution, they love their alma mater. It's all the other institutions that are the problem. It's all the other, you know, all the others. And so that dynamic also makes this conversation challenging too, because people get really focused on the great things that are going on at their institution, at their alma mater and sort of seeing the forest for the trees and being able to go back and forth. And I think legislators have a similar dynamic and trustees as well. It's like, "Well, I'm focused on my institution. It's every other institution in the state that is not deserving of money that got the favor last time, and so now we're due." And I think it makes it exciting on the one hand, but also really challenging, but why we need people engaged at various levels because the dynamics are always changing.

Rep. Harold Love:

I get that, and I would say this, if we're going to increase that pipeline, you also have to get a headstart. I mean, let's be honest, when we talk about opportunities for sitting on boards, oftentimes persons of color are not given the same opportunities because we don't have those other connections.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Rep. Harold Love:

We don't have the connection of your uncle knows somebody on the board and wants you to get the experience. So you're on the board and you sit there quiet and you learn about everything. It's even very basic simple things like Robert's Rules of Order and how to run a meeting and how to conduct these things.

Felecia Commodore:

Warms my heart.

Rep. Harold Love:

These are things that we used to have as commonplace in the Black church, but are not as prolific now. So what does it look like to then say the pipeline is created or expanded with not just the National Black Caucus state legislators, but the Black Accountants Association, the Black Engineers Association, and the best social workers. And so all these entities where you can then draw a wellspring because you may find at that association meeting the training that you give or the information you give somebody from that school who never thought about being on the board, but now see, it's not that bad, and maybe I can get this training and understanding so that when the opening does come.

Then I can say, "You know what? I went to an association meeting last year and they had a session on board because maybe as a lawyer, I can now sit on the board and provide that type of support for my institution, public and private that I never thought I could provide. And I understand now that I have an obligation, that this is my turn to sit on the wall and watch and protect the school. This is my year to do

it. Maybe next year, someone else year. But this is my year, and I'm only going to be on there for two or three years and roll off. But this is my turn and my obligation to my alma mater to sit on that wall and protect it."

Felecia Commodore:

That's great. Well, so you said Robert's Rules of Order and it warms my heart. I buy each edition like people buy Madden every year. But thank you all for... This has been a really great conversation.

Royel M. Johnson:

It has.

Felecia Commodore:

I do have one final question for the both of you, and that is what keeps you engaged in this difficult but very, very important work?

Rep. Harold Love:

So for me, I'm reminded of the words of Congressman John Lewis, that, and I'm going to paraphrase a bit here, that, "Ours is not the fight of a day, a week or a month or a year, but it's of a lifetime." And I take very seriously that... I'm also a pastor of church, I've been pastoring for 24 years now. So I also take very seriously the fact that there's a linked fate that I have with some brothers and sisters who may not have been blessed with the kind of life experience I've been blessed with. And if I at one point in time think that I'm good and can just protect me in mind, that that linked fate will hurt somebody else because I didn't reach back and help somebody else. I have to look out for those in the community because there is a linked fate between all of us.

And so that's what drives me and gets me up. That's what makes me go and fight in a legislature that sometime is unkind, that has expelled to young, Black, brilliant colleagues of mine. That's what gets me up to dive deeply into the underfunding of an HBCU. That's what gets me up to read the rules of the committee to make sure that things are done right. So that's what drives me.

Felecia Commodore:

That's great.

Demetri Morgan:

Brilliantly said, and I'll only add for me from a scholarship standpoint, there was a sort of bet, not a real bet, but a bet that we made on this area of scholarship around bridging governance and diversity, equity and inclusion work and trying to bring people into conversation about how critical governance is to the longevity of institutions, but also in deep need of the same sort of scrutiny and accountability that other areas of scholarship have received around games that they've made around DEI or not. And so we started that work pre-tenure when it wasn't a thing as much. And so part of what gets me up is seeing some of the gains we've made and now we get invited to conversations and we get invited to sort of think and speak about this, but there's so much more work to be done and there's so many more people we need to be involved in this work, both from a practice standpoint and from a research standpoint.

And so my hope is that continuing to be in a locator, somebody who is gassing this area up so that it hopefully excites other people into it because we need more brilliant ideas. We need more connections if we are to really transform institutions into what the best versions of themselves. And so that's what

keeps me going is there is so much work to do and there's so few. The labor, not going all churchy, but the laborers there are definitely not enough in this particular area. And so I'm hoping to continue to see that so that we can continue to make gains at this intersection and come alongside our colleagues in other areas that have been doing this for much longer.

Royel M. Johnson:

Well, thank you so much for your work that you do within your respective spheres of influence to advance equity, and thank you for joining us for this conversation. We appreciate so much the opportunity to be in community with you all.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I can go to bed happy tonight. This was really great conversation and I hope it... I mean, Demetri, I talk to you all the time, but Representative Love, I hope this is the beginning of more conversations because I really want to support the work that you're doing down in Tennessee, any way that we can do that. But thank you. Thank you so much to both of you. This has been a really great conversation.

Demetri Morgan:

Thanks for the invitation.

Rep. Harold Love:

Thank you all.

Royel M. Johnson:

Of course.

Rep. Harold Love:

And I'm expecting that email.

Felecia Commodore:

It's coming. Don't worry about it. It's going to be on the way.

Rep. Harold Love:

Okay.

Royel M. Johnson:

Thank you to our guests, Dr. Demetri Morgan, and Representative Harold Love for joining us today and engaging in such rich dialogue and for offering strategies for advancing equity through institutional and state level governance.

Felecia Commodore:

Those of you who have been along for the ride with us so far know that at the end of each conversation, we like to engage in a segment called Scholar Soundtrack as we reflect on what musical selections ring in our minds as we think through the day's conversation. Today, the song that came to mind was The Room Where It Happens from the Hamilton Official Broadway Cast album, because the reality of higher

education governance is whether at the institutional level or the state government level, at the heart of it all, conversations are being had and decisions are being made that have long-lasting and long-reaching impact on our institutions, colleagues, students, and their families. Our guests today encourage us to learn more about processes and policies and finding ways to build alliances and partnerships so that voices can be heard and considered in the rooms where it happened. Our connected fate depends on it.

Room Where It Happens - Hamilton Soundtrack:

(Singing).

Felecia Commodore:

Wow. That was today's song for our Scholar Soundtrack. You'll be able to find a playlist of these songs along with the syllabus for today's episode and all the episodes in the ASHE Presidential Podcast series. These conversations continue to motivate and invigorate us.

Royel M. Johnson:

Buckle up and get ready for the conversations to come. You don't want to miss this. Join us next week as we continue to discuss the purposes, politics and practices of higher education. Until next week, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm Felecia.

Royel M. Johnson:

Until next time. Be fearless.

Felecia Commodore:

Be fearless.