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Commonwealth Compact: Using Research to Promote Diversity

Robert Turner

Commonwealth Compact

Commonwealth Compact is a statewide initiative of the University of Massachusetts Boston launched in 2008 with a primary focus of promoting diversity—especially racial and ethnic diversity—in the workplace. In addition to conducting workshops, sponsoring forums, and creating job placement tools, Commonwealth Compact has conducted research, which is the central focus of this article.

Three rounds of Benchmarks reports, using data from 2007, 2008, and 2011, showed that the reporting Massachusetts employers generally weathered the recession fairly well but that efforts to improve racial diversity lagged far behind those for gender diversity.

Data from two national surveys, produced for Commonwealth Compact in 2010 and 2013, support the widespread belief that Americans generally, and African Americans particularly, see Boston and Massachusetts as being less welcoming than other cities to persons of color. The data suggest strongly that the region could benefit greatly if that reputation could be turned around.

“Words are fine,” Joan Wallace-Benjamin said, “but numbers are powerful. Numbers make things happen.”

Wallace-Benjamin is the longtime CEO of the Home for Little Wanderers, which cares for some seven thousand children a year. She was responding in 2008 to the formation of Commonwealth Compact, a statewide diversity initiative that was to focus on research as much as advocacy—research intended to make things happen, research with clout.

The first move was inward looking. The Compact wanted to find out about the Massachusetts workforce, its people and its policies. A detailed Benchmarks survey asked employers from all sectors about the diversity of their workers and what policies were being employed to attract talent of color and to retain it. (To date, there have been three Benchmarks surveys.) Next, Commonwealth Compact looked further afield. Many persons locally have long felt that Boston and Massachusetts continue to suffer from a reputation of being unwelcoming to people of color. There were plenty of anecdotes supporting that view, but few numbers. Partnering with a nationally known marketing firm, the Compact obtained research in two separate surveys that showed the area does indeed have a significant problem—but also an enormous opportunity, if it can improve its reputation.

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Commonwealth Compact

As the founding dean of the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Stephen P. Crosby wanted to use that position to confront the racial frictions and frustrations that existed before the school integration/busing turmoil of the 1970s and seemed to persist years afterward.

Even before Commonwealth Compact was formed, Crosby wanted to explore the state's racial landscape, and to do so quantitatively, when possible. In 2006, he commissioned a statewide opinion survey that, according to the report, revealed, among other findings, that many persons of color had experienced racial discrimination firsthand. Another report looked at the small number of minorities in state and local governments—especially in senior-level positions and on boards and commissions. Still another report, entitled “A Seat at the Table?,” details the findings of a survey Crosby had commissioned that looked at the race and gender of more than four thousand members of the boards of 242 organizations. The survey was conducted by McCormack's Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy. For the corporate boards, in particular, the numbers were stark: 95 percent white, 87 percent male.

At the same time that the center's Carol Hardy-Fanta and Donna Stewartson published “A Seat at the Table?” in May 2007, Crosby convened groups of leading citizens to discuss needs and options. The groups were unanimous in saying that, despite several existing initiatives, much more needed to be done. Gradually, the advisers focused their attention on the workplace. One factor pointing to an opportunity in the workplace was the common perception that increased diversity was needed badly by the local economy, which is knowledge-based and cannot afford to lose talent because individuals think they will not be welcome here. But at the time there was little research data buttressing this widespread belief.

Crosby went to work. He recruited the *Boston Globe*'s publisher, Steven Ainsley, and one of Boston's most prominent lawyers, Ralph Martin, who was also chair of the board of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce at the time, to be co-conveners, and Robert Turner, who was then retiring after a long career as a *Globe* reporter and editor, to be executive director. Commonwealth Compact was launched officially on May 23, 2008. Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick and Boston mayor Thomas Menino were among five hundred persons who attended a breakfast meeting in the University of Massachusetts Boston ballroom. Crosby received a prolonged standing ovation when he promised that Commonwealth Compact would deal honestly with the region's history with race relations, and with current realities.

This promise reflected the Compact's mission statement: “To establish Massachusetts as a uniquely inclusive, honest and supportive community of—and for—diverse people. To acknowledge our mixed history in this effort, and to face squarely the challenges that still need to be overcome, understanding that the rich promise of the region's growing diversity must be tapped fully if Boston and Massachusetts are to achieve their economic, civic, and social potential.”

Early on, the Compact began developing a talent network to connect persons of color with jobs, board and commission appointments, and other opportunities. The Compact has also run numerous workshops, established a fellowship program at the State House, organized an innovative collaborative of local business schools to recruit faculty of color, cosponsored a series of forums under the title “Boston Talks Race” and two mayoral debates and led or participated in several other initiatives. But research has been a key focus of Commonwealth Compact from the first, starting with the Benchmarks and continuing with the marketing surveys.

The Benchmarks

Although there was wide agreement that a survey of the workforce was necessary, there were differences, initially, over how detailed it should be. Some argued for simplicity, saying that many employers would be turned off if collecting the requested data proved too burdensome. But the opposite view prevailed. The Compact decided that it wanted to know and be able to analyze not just what the workforce looked like but what policies were in place to diversify boards, to hold managers accountable, to understand the corporate culture, to track data, to retain employees of color, and to ascertain which of these policies were effective.

Soon, there was evidence of the Benchmarks' usefulness. WGBH, a public television and radio station that is a major part of the Greater Boston community, reported that collecting the Benchmarks data had required significant effort but was beneficial in the long run. The company expected to do well on most metrics, according to a spokesperson, and in fact did so. But it discovered, to its surprise, that it did not have a coherent policy to encourage the use of diverse vendors and suppliers. Such a policy was promptly put in place.

Benchmarks data were collected for 2007, 2008, and 2011 and were analyzed in three reports, respectively, "Stepping Up," "Facing Up," and "Managing Up." More than a hundred employers submitted data each time. They ranged in size but included many of the state's largest employers, among them Harvard, M.I.T., Tufts, Northeastern, the University of Massachusetts, Partners HealthCare, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, John Hancock Financial Services, the TJX Companies, Walmart Stores, Staples, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the City of Boston.

Since the start, more than three hundred employers have signed on to Commonwealth Compact, indicating a strong interest in workforce diversity statewide. More than two hundred have submitted data for one or more of the surveys.

Carefully designed research should contribute to a better understanding of the specific question at hand. But often that data-gathering produces unintended consequences, some of which can be puzzling, while others can be highly informative and beneficial. It is doubtful whether this observation will be seen as a fresh insight by any researcher.

One example stands out from "Managing Up," the report on the Compact's last Benchmarks survey. While more than a hundred employers filed data for 2008 and 2011, only forty-two filed for both years; thus, while the percentages were of interest, their aggregate gross-number data revealed nothing about trends. A comparison of the numbers for the forty-two employers shows, however, that their overall employment and budget numbers had risen. Employment went up from 92,218 to 102,783, an increase of 17 percent. And the total budgets of these forty-two employers went up from \$65.6 billion to \$70 billion, an increase of 6.7 percent. Both percentage increases were far above state averages during the heart of the recession. This outcome does not constitute proof of the business case for diversity—there are far too many variables. And there may be anomalies. For instance, the workforce diversity of these forty-two employers may be skewed by one or two large employers. Still, these forty-two have a higher level of diversity than the total workforce in Massachusetts—24.4 percent versus 18 percent in 2011. So it is fair to see these data as encouraging—one signal that a diversified workforce can be associated with a healthy bottom line.

Other key findings from the 2011 Benchmarks report:

1. The number of Compact members that submitted 2011 Benchmark data declined, to 105, from 125 that submitted 2008 data and 111 that submitted 2007 data. The reason most frequently

given by members that failed to provide information for this report was that they were short staffed because of the recession. Still, this report contains data on 174,519 employees, some 5.4 percent of the entire state workforce.

2. The overall diversity of the Compact filers held constant—27 percent in 2007, 26 percent in 2008, and 26 percent in 2011. The same held for repeat filers: 24.5 percent in 2008 and 24.4 percent in 2011. While one would always hope for growth, we believe these numbers are encouraging, since workers of color experience job loss during a recession in many parts of the country. And they are all well above the diversity of the entire state workforce, which was 18 percent in 2011, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau.

3. Black and Hispanic workers moved into higher-tier jobs between 2007 and 2008, according to the previous Benchmarks report, “Stepping Up,” but slipped back somewhat in the 2011 data. Benchmarks data from all employers show that 13 percent of black employees were in top-tier jobs in 2008, but only 7 percent in 2011. Meanwhile, blacks in third-tier jobs, the lowest, went from 47 percent to 59 percent. Similarly, for Hispanics, the top-tier numbers went from 9 percent to 7 percent, and the bottom tier from 48 percent to 54 percent. Repeat filers told a somewhat different story, with similar declines at the top levels for workers of color, but with shifts more toward mid-level rather than third-tier jobs.

4. For 2011, 38 percent of CEOs said they are satisfied with the racial/ethnic diversity of their leadership team, an improvement from 28 percent in 2008 but still a number that indicates CEOs know they need to do much more. It is also half of the 77 percent satisfaction CEOs say they have with the gender diversity of their leadership team.

5. There was strong evidence of increased diversity efforts. The CEOs of repeat filers were asked about four specific steps, and the percentages were up on all four (Figure 1). One of the strongest steps, linking a manager’s promotion to his or her diversity performance, doubled from 16 percent to 32 percent between 2008 and 2011. Of the nine other steps that were asked about, five were being embraced more widely, two were the same, and only two had small declines. For instance, the number that said their boards routinely discussed diversity issues went up from 46 percent to 61 percent.

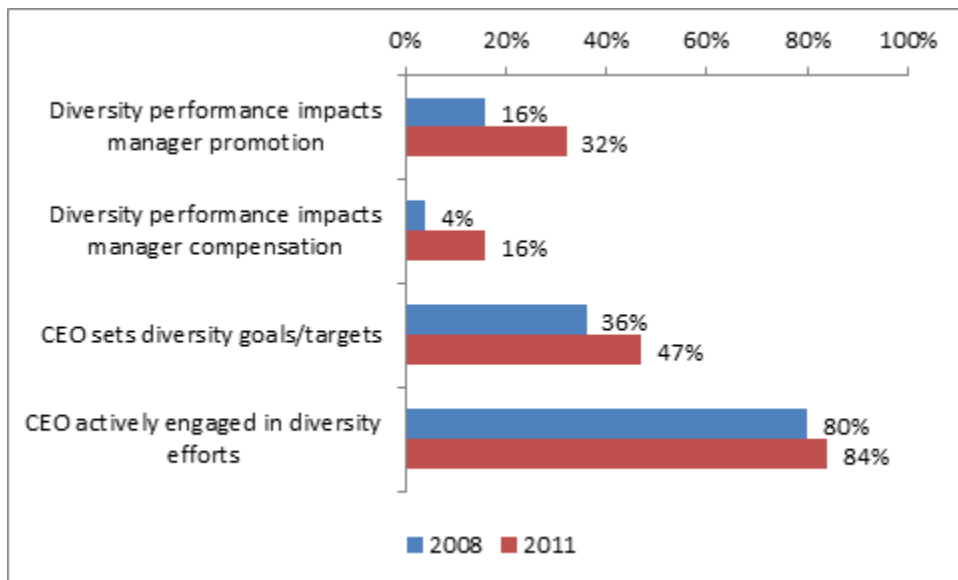


Figure 1. CEO leadership on diversity, repeat filers, 2008, 2011

6. There was considerable variation among sectors. For-profit employers, for instance, reported the least diversity, but the employees of color who are in that sector were distributed relatively equitably among higher- and lower-level jobs.

7. In higher education, 83 percent of tenured faculty were white, but only 68 percent of tenure-track faculty were white, an indication, perhaps, that future faculties will be somewhat more diverse. But both numbers were well above those for students—the schools reported that only 60 percent of their undergraduates are white.

8. On boards of directors, people of color made up 20 percent of voting members. This figure is well above the findings of other surveys, including a 2015 *Boston Globe* survey that found only 7 percent of a sampling of board members were persons of color. Even among employers that voluntarily filed Benchmarks data with Commonwealth Compact, however, 13 percent of boards had no person of color in any position, and 46 percent had none on their executive committee.

National Surveys

While the central focus of Commonwealth Compact has always been racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace, there has also been an abiding interest in a related subject—the reputation that Boston and Massachusetts have throughout the rest of the country.

Every recruiter, from corporate scouts to college admissions officers, knows that Boston is not attracting all the talent it could because many people of color think they would not be welcome here. Countless anecdotes describe the situation. When James Rooney, later president of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, was the head of the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority, he often described his frustration at trying to recruit minority organizations to hold their conventions here. Rooney said the head of Blacks in Government, which attracts close to ten thousand persons to its annual gathering, told him repeatedly, “I can’t ask my members to have their convention in Boston—they don’t want to come.”

Rooney is a son of South Boston who is passionate about the benefits of diversity. His persistence eventually paid off and several large minority organizations, including the Urban League and Blacks in Government, held highly successful conventions in Boston.

Still, the anecdotes persisted. Toward the end of his tenure as host of the *Daily Show*, Jon Stewart regaled viewers with his answer to the question, Is the South more racist than the North? “No,” Stewart said, “we’ve been to Boston.”

Despite such anecdotes and painful gibes, there seemed to be little interest in doing the kind of research that might indicate what the region’s reputation really is, and what effect this might have, economically and otherwise.

Unable to find significant research, or plans for any, Commonwealth Compact stepped in. The prominent national marketing firm of Chadwick Martin Bailey (CMB) agreed to add several diversity questions to a national survey it conducted in 2010, and again in 2013. The results were similar, and were not ambiguous. In the latter survey, only 61 percent of Americans thought Boston was “welcoming to people of color,” lower than six other cities (New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Miami, Atlanta, and Philadelphia) and ahead only of Charlotte. Among African Americans nationally, Boston was at the very bottom—only 47 percent said we are welcoming. Charlotte was next lowest at 58 percent. Hispanic Americans gave similar responses.

While these data were discouraging on their face, they also contained elements of opportunity. For instance, while only 20 percent of African Americans said they had ever visited Boston (the lowest of the eight cities), 85 percent said they would be willing to. Also, Boston was the only one of the eight cities in the survey to show an improved reputation among all Americans—and African Americans specifically—over the earlier CMB survey from 2010.

As with the Benchmarks data, CMB’s research produced some unexpected results. About half the white people in the survey indicated they had visited Boston at some point—a figure comparable to that for other cities in the survey, such as San Francisco and Philadelphia (Figure 2). But only 20 percent of African Americans said they had ever been to Boston, indicating a deficit in tourism dollars alone. And since tourism is the third largest contributor to the Massachusetts economy, the data pointed to a major opportunity. If Boston could attract as many African American visitors as the 28 percent who have been to San Francisco (which has a smaller black population), the estimated boost to the economy would be close to \$500 million a

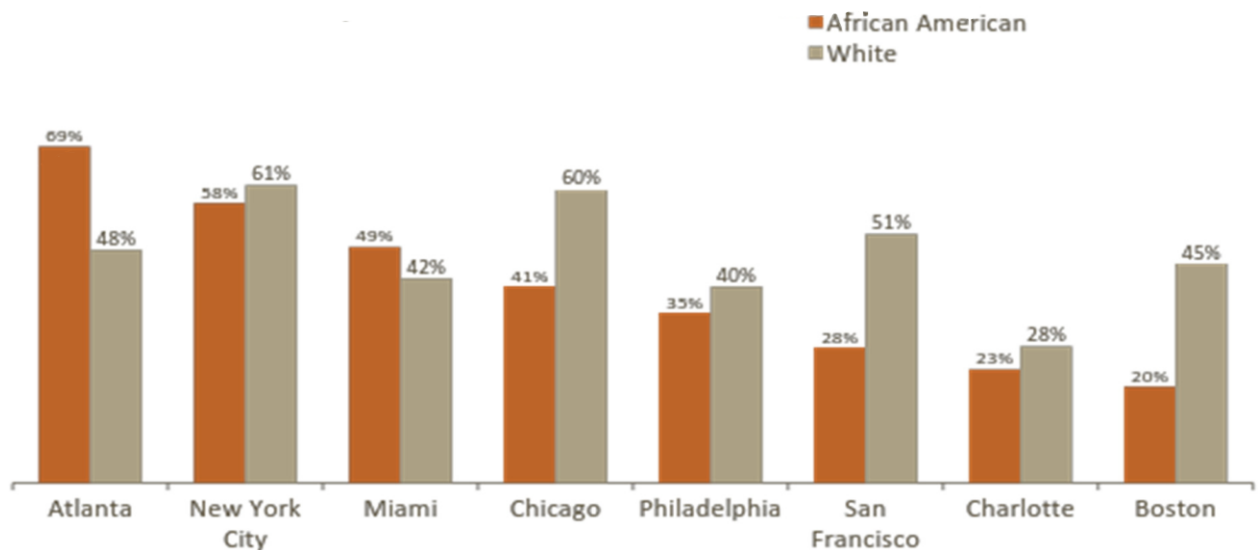


Figure 2. African American and white respondents who have lived in or visited each survey city

Commonwealth Compact’s experience with research data leads to three recommendations—for deeper research, for more collaboration, and for enlightened tenacity.

Deeper research can explore causes and potential remedies in more detail and, if designed carefully, more productively.

Boston was once described as “lacking the collaborative gene.” But there is clearly a confluence of self-interest that would benefit by an approach that pulls together many of the region’s social and economic drivers, with solid research to inform their collaborations.

Numbers can indeed “make things happen,” as Wallace-Benjamin said, but rarely by themselves. Commonwealth Compact’s experience indicates that the status of diversity in Boston and Massachusetts—the reputation and the reality—can be understood more thoroughly through research and can be improved if that research is embraced and acted on by persevering citizens.