

3. Board Diversification

Garden:

Zilker Botanical Garden Conservancy

Primary: Wilda Campbell

wildacampbell@gmail.com

Project Title: IDEA Board Project

Description:

We are working towards diversity in staff, programming, and all aspects of the Zilker Botanical Garden, but first and foremost is having a board with diverse perspectives. Each board member will bring personal and professional contacts and life experiences to their service on the ZBG board. We will identify community partners/organizations and cultivate relationships with their members that will assist in identifying potential new board members. We will also develop supportive activities that will encourage new and old board members to be active, productive leaders of ZBG.

With diverse experience, expertise, and perspectives represented in the Garden's Board leadership, the Garden will be in a stronger position to plan for the future, manage risk, make prudent decisions, and take full advantage of opportunities for partnerships and programming in particular. In addition, a diverse board sensitive to cultural differences is usually one that has a more robust capacity to attract and retain talented board members and is in touch with community needs.

Emerging from the worst of Covid, Zilker Botanical Garden Conservancy (ZBGC) has a skeleton staff, and a reduced number of Board of Trustees. Standing committees are either not functioning or operating with only one person, but the Garden had clearly been an important refuge for many during the health crisis and was ready to move ahead in the Summer of 2022 when our project began.

Project Goals:

Diversity of the Board of the Zilker Botanical Garden- Identify and cultivate new board members who can expand the board's collective cultural awareness. Look for candidates with diverse professional expertise, cultural backgrounds, and a spectrum of life experiences who can help ZBG respond to future needs. Diversity will be defined as referring to ability, age, ethnicity, gender identity, geography, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

The need for new members was clear with 10 vacancies on the 25-member Board, which needed to be filled quickly and therefore made it more difficult to focus solely on diversity. Additional members would help managing the varied requirements of the nascent role of the Conservancy in a tripartite management structure of the City of Austin, ZBGC, and Austin Area Garden Council (AAGC). Effectively recruiting diverse members clearly required more upfront activity than there was time for in early 2023. The goal of attaining a reasonable 18 would ensure members facing term ends could roll off without seriously hindering our capabilities.

Project Team Participants:

Initially Wilda Campbell, Stephanie Hunter and Cynthia Klemmer, and eventually members of the Board Governance Committee.

In support of the goal to add diversity to the Board, the Conservancy leaders asked two of our Cohort Team to serve on the Nominating and Governance Committee. This enabled us to work comfortably and

actively with the Board to identify member skill areas needed as well as recruit and nominate new members.

Stakeholders:

All staff, visitors, garden clubs, board members and the Austin community. Internal/Partnership stakeholders - Austin Parks & Rec Dept., Zilker Botanical Garden Conservancy board and staff, Austin Area Garden Council (AAGC)

Resources:

Funding will be needed for expert assistance in designing two tools: 1) to assess the project team, staff, and board members cultural sensitivity that may need to be strengthened and 2) self-checklists that would provide feedback on member's contributions against their original goals for serving on the Board. Funding will also be needed to plan and implement training of new members. Funding may be needed for new member recruitment; however, initially we hope to identify candidates through partnerships listed above. Funding or in-kind contributions will be needed for a new board members' welcoming gathering after every 4 new members are added. We expect the project implementation to be on-going but much more time consuming during the initial year as the activities roll out and 4 new members are added to the board.

Milestones & Deadlines:

August-October 2022 - Share project proposal with Cohort members and ZBGC board members for input and finalize project. Cultivate relationships between ZBGC and potential supportive stakeholders.

October-December 2022 - Develop board members assessment tool and identify interests/strengths and support needed to contribute to identifying and supporting potential new members. Cultivate relationships between ZBGC and potential supportive stakeholders and seek their suggestions for new board members candidates. Begin actively identifying potential new members. Identify technical support needed to plan and conduct training, and to develop a tool for members' self-assessment of their contributions to the work of the board. Develop an in-boarding plan for new members including mentorship with experienced board members.

January-March 2023 - Recruit 2 new members. Cultivate relationships between ZBGC and potential supportive stakeholders and seek their recommendations. Plan and implement first training/orientation. Test and initiate self-assessment of contribution to the board tool.

March-May 2023 - Continue new member recruitment (2 additional recruits), training/orientation, in-boarding activities and utilizing information collected on self-assessment tool to improve recruitment/training for newest members. Cultivate relationships between ZBGC and potential supportive stakeholders. Hold a celebratory welcome party for old and new board members and representatives of stakeholders. Plan and conduct assessment of progress of project and determine activities/participants going forward.

Developing recruiting plans, working on partnerships with diverse community cultural groups, working with current Board of Trustees to assess their own roles and then to help identify potential candidates, were all initiated with varying degrees of success. As of May 1, 2023 we have recruited three new members, one of whom represents diversity, plus two potential members, one representing South Asian communities. We have begun interaction with partner community groups but feel we have not

embraced that goal as actively as needed. We believe summer is a good time to regroup and increase ties with these entities.

The Conservancy's partnership with the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) can offer some added connections and contacts with regard to the goal of reaching/partnering with more community groups, noting in particular:

- The Mexican American Cultural Center—a program unit within the Parks Department. A programming partnership is already in place with the Garden's education department, and offers opportunity for further relationship-building with their stakeholders and participants.
- The Asian American Resource Center—a program unit within the Parks Department, and the Japan America Society of Greater Austin, which already conducts monthly volunteer service in the Taniguchi Japanese Garden at the Zilker Botanical Garden. Evan Taniguchi, grandson of the founder and creator of this first garden space at ZBG, is a former board member and remains active in support and collaboration with the Garden, and is a key figure in the Austin Asian Community.
- City of Austin/PARC Equity Office—Established in the past several years, with a specific focus on fostering equity through City functions. The Parks Department established an Equity Officer who has capacity for support, guidance and potential contacts/resources to continue pursuing IDEA goals that will relate to Board diversity as well as operational and programmatic collaborations.

We initiated the first all-board self-assessment with no objections from all members who hope to continue Board service. Results of the survey helped us see not only members' strengths and who was under involved, but also the receipt of suggestions to improve the board experience overall (in addition to IDEA goals). We are in the process of developing a digital introductory materials packet and plan a Fall workshop for new members, followed by an inclusive gathering with stakeholder representatives. Incorporating self-assessment suggestions, the Board will begin in-person plus Zoom meetings to ensure more participation in meetings. It will also revive the Covid-languishing committees with opportunities for new and old members to be involved. We did not develop the cultural sensitivity test but realize we may need to tackle this as we improve member numbers and diversity. Without Board diversity, the exercise may have proved a bit implausible.

Potential Risks to Success and Completion:

Develop a sense of belonging, commitment, and comradeship for new members on a board that meets only quarterly for an hour on Zoom with the opportunity to expand that experience on committees, volunteering in activities from educational to actual gardening. We do not expect the project to complete because new member recruitment is a continuous need for a board with 3 years terms.

Why did you pick your project?

We recognized promptly a distinct lack of diversity on our board, which foundations have mentioned in response to grant applications.

What were your biggest takeaways/lessons learned?

This is not a one-time task, but an ongoing process that will improve the Board's dynamics and functionality.

We're all in this together – it was comforting to see many Gardens in the Cohort are facing similar challenges and dilemmas, and that we are not behind the curve. We all have a long way ahead. Small steps count, and we all learned basic tools along the way. There are watershed moments, but also small, quiet moments/steps/actions we can take.

What resources did you use and would you recommend?

Cohort resources were wonderful assets: ample articles, recordings, organizations to pull from as needed for continuing education.

Board added two Cohort members on the Governance Committee.

Mae Lin provided a great kick-start, and her enthusiasm is infectious.

Sessions were a whole new education: great speakers and knowledge, many lessons more advanced than would currently apply but helpful for the future, and others directly applicable.

Resources also include other Cohort members; we need to continue to utilize this more and learn from an important new peer group.

If you were to go back and do things differently, what would you have done?

Dig into QiQo chat deeper/further initially. It seems a great resource, and we did not fully utilize.

What advice would you give others?

I would highly recommend joining and participating, even if you don't feel ready. If you wait, you might never do it. Everyone else is in the same boat – just do it! I'm glad we jumped in even if we felt unprepared because this program stimulated action on our part.

What's next for you?

Continue to insist on diversity as a priority with the board.

Programming-Cultural programs outlined and continue to expand, reach out and create relationships with cultural organizations as well as individuals.