



# Accountability in the Electronic Age

*Technology has made sweeping changes in the responsibilities faced by trustees — and provided new tools to promote transparency and make inroads into their communities.*

BY MARK TONER

**T**HE MORNING OF FEBRUARY 8 IS ONE that people at the Louisiana Technical College Baton Rouge Campus would rather forget. When a 23-year-old student walked into a classroom with a .357 revolver just before 8:30 a.m., killing two classmates before taking her own life, the school took center stage locally and nationally. Besides the obvious attention to the tragedy of the event, it would also set an example for a timely and effective response to an unexpected, violent incident on a college campus.

Police arrived within two minutes of the first 911 calls, and LTC Baton Rouge immediately activated its emergency response plan. Students were kept in classrooms for two hours, while college officials coordinated with Baton Rouge police and state officials on the investigation and a safe dismissal procedure. The college's Web site was updated throughout the day, keeping a step ahead of the relentless 24/7 news cycle by providing information as officials received it. At noon, the site confirmed that "the two victims and shooter were students at the LTC Baton Rouge Campus. Their identities have not been released at this time, but their ages are known — 21, 23, and 26."

ILLUSTRATION BY CARL WIENS



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By day’s end, the site included a statement from Louisiana Community and Technical College System President Dr. Joe May, who began by “acknowledging the rapid and professional response of Dr. Kay McDaniel, Regional Director for the LTC Region 2, and her staff in handling this tragedy.”

The incident was a reminder of the importance of well-executed emergency-response plans — and the responsibilities trustees face in a world in which the stakes are higher than ever before. Emergency plans are “an area trustees should continue to examine and probe for new ideas as part of their oversight role,” says ACCT General Counsel Ira Michael Shepard (see p. 26). More and more community college trustees have done just that, and in recent months boards in several states have debated whether to let campus security officials carry guns.

But oversight and accountability don’t only come into play during crisis situations. The proliferation of the Internet within virtually every aspect of daily life and the never-ending 24-hour news cycle — via television, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and even mobile phones — has placed trustees’ day-to-day roles as stewards and spokespeople for their community colleges under even greater scrutiny.

Technology has changed trustees’ roles in the same way it has altered other professionals’ responsibilities throughout the world. Information can be acquired in an instant — from both reliable and unreliable sources, it’s worth noting — and people can stay in constant communication by way of e-mail, instant messaging, cell phones, PDAs such as Blackberries, and other means.

But the rapid pace of technological change has also given college boards new ways to reach out to their communities — and tools to promote transparency at a time when the need to be immediately responsive has become as expected as finding something to watch on 500 cable channels or reading one of a million stories instantly accessible at a click of Google’s “I feel lucky” button.

“Accountability is now 24/7,” says ACCT President and CEO J. Noah Brown.

## Information Overload

During her nearly nine years as a trustee, Kathy Wessel has watched as local media coverage of her board meetings has been transformed by the Web.

“Stories are posted on the local newspapers’ Web sites immediately,” says Wessel, a trustee of the College of DuPage and

president of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association (ICCTA). “Rather than waiting until the next morning to pick up the newspaper, within an hour of the board meeting, it’s up on the Web site.”

So far, so good. But one of the newspapers allows readers to post comments about news stories — and “of course, they respond anonymously,” Wessel adds, admitting that she “checks them out, but I don’t take them very seriously. It’s made it more interesting.”

In both good ways and bad, the Internet has led to a massive increase in the amount of information trustees must now sift through. Media relations staffs at many colleges have long compiled coverage of the college across various outlets — television, radio, and now, the Internet — to keep trustees up to speed on what goes out every day. Because of the proliferation of news sources, the monthly report of media “hits” included in the board members’ monthly meeting packets have ballooned, and they often include clippings from sources far from the colleges’ local areas.

While college trustees are working as hard as they can to keep up with the technology, in many ways technology also makes the work easier and faster due to its immediacy.

Board management software, for instance, promises to streamline the work of keeping trustees well-informed and well-organized. Such tools help schedule meetings and communicate information to trustees, as well as keep information about board members in a secure, centralized location. The tools, usually Web-based, are also used to collate and electronically distribute documents ahead of meetings.

Quick access to information is critical for trustees charged with making decisions that can impact their institutions for decades. For example, online searches using Google, Yahoo! and similar search engines can yield information about candidates in the midst of presidential searches. At the same time, though, there are limitations to becoming overly reliant on technology — and the potential for serious problems.

“There’s a place for technology, and times where technology doesn’t have a place,” says ACCT Vice President Dr. Narcisa Polonio, who has sourced scores of presidential and executive candidates for two-year institutions (see pp. 28-29). “The Internet can be a great tool, but at the end of the day, conscientious and thorough searches require old-fashioned, face-to-face contact even more than data mining. Who a person is as a human being has everything to do with how effective she or he will be as an executive in charge of an educational institution.”

## When Searching Doesn't Involve Google

Polonio points to how an ill-timed Google search once threatened to do considerable damage to a presidential search on one community college campus. During the search, a faculty member did a search of his own, and found one candidate named as a party in a lawsuit. The faculty member "spread that information across the campus" — without being aware that in most lawsuits against institutions, the president is named as a defendant. "It had nothing to do with the president," Polonio says. "A lot of damage control had to take place to make sure the candidate would be treated the way they should be."

"Lots of things can be misinterpreted," she adds. At the same time, community colleges can use their own Web sites as a way to communicate information about ongoing searches — including timetables, announcements of the finalists and selection criteria — as a way to keep the entire community informed, according to Polonio. "It allows everyone to get the same information at the same time from an accurate source," she says. "What I like about that most is that it's an instrument that equalizes the distribution of information" — particularly important for community colleges with high commuter student populations who can keep abreast of developments from their computers at home.

At the same time college communities may be scouring the Internet for information about prospective candidates, those candidates often look to the Web as a key source about prospective jobs. "The college's Web site becomes a recruitment tool," Polonio says, including information not just about the position but also links to such material as strategic plans, budgets, accreditation reports and community organizations such as chambers of commerce.

The logistics of many searches, including all those conducted with the assistance of ACCT, are now conducted almost exclusively online, with applications and communications with candidates exchanged electronically, according to Polonio. On balance, the Internet has provided "more positives than negatives," she says.

## Bobby Knight, E-mail, and Open Meetings

Most people are probably familiar with Bobby Knight's name for one reason or another. Arguably as well known for his public outbursts as his basketball championships, the legendary coach now has a new, somewhat dubious distinction to add to his list of accomplishments: an open-meetings provision unofficially named in his honor.

When Myles Brand, then president of Indiana University, decided in 2000 that he wanted to fire Knight, he convened the university's board of trustees during Homecoming weekend. To skirt open meeting laws that would have required public notice of a meeting at a time IU alumni were present on campus in large numbers, Brand held a series of meetings with trustees in different rooms of his house — each room holding too few board members to constitute the quorum that would trigger the public-notification requirement. Nearly seven years later, the state's governor signed into a law a provision that effectively barred such "serial meetings," a move that's been repeated in several other states.

Most community colleges don't have world-class basketball programs, but they still must remain up-to-date on such changes to open-meeting laws. "The press is very watchful, and is always looking to make sure we haven't violated the open meetings act," says Wessel, adding that ICCTA discusses changes in open meetings laws during its legal update seminars every year. "We are made constantly aware of what's appropriate and what isn't," she says. "We're very conscientious about following the law to the letter."

As e-mail has replaced letters, however, much of the focus on open meetings and freedom of information laws has centered on that form of electronic communication. At the College of DuPage, board members consulted with their attorney and developed a policy, which now is posted on the college's Web site ([www.cod.edu](http://www.cod.edu)), according to Wessel.

Aside from information such as the meeting packets and memos from the board office and the college's president, very little communication — and no business whatsoever — happens online. "We occasionally communicate one-on-one, but not with great frequency — and when we do, we do it with great care," Wessel says. "The chairman, for example, doesn't send out information to the whole board and doesn't ask for responses. Our attorneys have been very good with this, and we've been scrupulous because we want to be as transparent as we possibly can."

While technology such as e-mail presents new challenges, it also provides new ways for trustees to stay connected to their duties. Technology has made it easier for trustees to stay apprised of legislative issues and improve their own knowledge of their role. "There's a real interest in communicating and learning what's going on in other places — and from each other," Wessel says.

ACCT Public Policy Director Jee Hang Lee has maintained regular updates about federal legislation of importance to community college trustees on ACCT's Web site ([www.acct.org](http://www.acct.org)) for some time now. Because of the timeliness and facility of e-mail, he recently began a "Latest Legal Action in Washington E-Alert" newsletter to update ACCT members on public policy and ACCT's advocacy efforts virtually minutes after he gets wind of changes in legislation. "Years ago, the telephone was the only way to let people know about important actions taking place on Capitol Hill, and there was no way to call everyone who needed and wanted to know," Lee says. "E-mail and Web sites have made what used to be impossible possible, and thanks to these technologies community college trustees can make better-informed decisions and become involved in the political process."

Changing technologies have also made it easier for trustees to reach out to their communities. Growing numbers of community colleges, for example, are televising their board meetings — or broadcasting them on the Internet — reaching new audiences and ensuring transparency (see story, pp. 20-22).

One thing is certain: Navigating the ongoing technological changes that are continually reshaping society will likely remain a continuous learning process.