

Her



Trustees use the Internet and other technologies to make sure they stay connected with their boards — and their communities.

E THeRe Everywhere

By Mark Toner



Sometimes, it can't be helped:

Trustees occasionally have to be in two places at once. Board meetings can be scheduled after cross-country trips have been booked; personal business can crop up unexpectedly. Depending on the state, public meeting laws often forbid proxy votes or voice votes over the phone. But if board bylaws permit it, another option does exist: videoconferencing.

At times, trustees have used the technology — often available at a local FedEx Kinko's or similar franchise — to attend critical board meetings, even when they're on the opposite side of the country. Many community colleges already use videoconferencing technology for classroom instruction, and all it basically requires is an ISDN connection and a camera on the remote end to make it work.

Of course, the technology has its downsides as well. Because videoconferencing is so easy to use, it's always possible that it could

make it easier for board members to avoid attending meetings, some trustees say. One trustee who paid the \$600 out-of-pocket cost of a recent teleconferencing session during a board meeting suggests making trustees responsible for all costs to dissuade frivolous requests to participate remotely. After all, even with the advantages of available technology, videoconferencing and similar electronic means of communication can't replace face-to-face contact for building and maintaining relationships and trust.

“When people have access to information, they feel empowered. [Technology has] been invaluable in providing access and transparency.”

— TRACY DALY
South Orange County Community College District

Online, Any Time

As with videoconferencing, technology holds the promise of extending connections to communities and constituencies, especially when in-person contact is difficult or impossible. At many schools, board meetings are piped across campuses via the school's closed-circuit television systems or intranets. But in California, several community college districts are now using the Internet to let anyone watch board meetings online, at any time.

The South Orange County Community College District (SOCCCD) in Mission Viejo, Calif., has televised board of trustees meetings via public-access cable television for a decade, says Tracy Daly, the district's director of public affairs and intergovernmental relations. To ensure the system's 2,500 employees could watch the meetings as well, SOCCCD also had placed videotapes, and then DVDs, in the schools' libraries. “Very few people attend board meetings, even though they impact thousands and thousands of students,” Daly says.

As staff watched local city governments start broadcasting their own public meetings online, they began researching ways to bring the district's meetings to larger audiences. A key concern was ensuring that large video files of the two-hour meetings — or the high bandwidth requirements of streaming video — wouldn't slow the district's computer networks to a crawl.

SOCCCD ultimately partnered with a video-streaming company called Granicus (www.granicus.com), which began posting the board of trustees meetings online in August 2007. “Because it's a streaming video, it doesn't bog down our servers at all,” Daly says. “[The video] is on a Granicus server in another state.”

While board meetings typically draw as many as 100 members of the public when a high-interest topic is under consideration, more than 1,000 people now watch some or all of each meeting online, Daly says.

The online broadcasts are also accompanied by a hyperlinked list of agenda items for each meeting; clicking on an agenda item cues the video directly to that part of the discussion. “Before, they would have to watch for an hour or more and not know exactly where any specific part of the discussion was going to be, or they'd have to tape it and fast-forward through it,” Daly says. “Now they can go online and click on the item they want to know about and hear the board members deliberate.”

Since the video streaming began nearly a year ago, the amount of misinformation and calls seeking clarity about board decisions has dropped dramatically, according to Daly. “When people have access to information, they feel empowered,” she says. “It's been invaluable in terms of providing access and transparency.”

Televised Meetings: C-SPAN or Spam?

While the number of community colleges that currently post board meetings online is still the minority, those that are doing so are continuing a practice that began more than a decade ago when the first schools began broadcasting trustee meetings on public-access cable networks. Consider it the community college version of C-SPAN, the public affairs channel that began airing Congressional proceedings during the dawn of the cable-television era.

One board chair admits that she “wasn't totally sold” on the idea of televising board meetings when the technology first surfaced at her campus about six years ago. “I felt board members might take advantage of that,” she said.

To be sure, there's always the potential that board members will play to the camera as they make sound bite-worthy speeches that do little to advance the board's agenda. Incorporating new technologies into governance processes inevitably presents new challenges, but those who are willing to face those challenges are finding new opportunities for better communication. Broadcasting board meetings helps trustees reach larger audiences, ensuring greater transparency.

“People I never would have thought would watch” the meetings are watching, according to one board member. Another big hit on public-access television: replays of graduation ceremonies, which are aired repeatedly to ensure anyone with a vested interest in a matriculating student can watch.

In Illinois, audio recordings of trustee board meetings have been available on the College of DuPage's Web site (www.cod.edu) for nearly a year. While “I've never had anybody come up to me and say, ‘Gee, I listened to your podcast,’ that doesn't mean that they don't,” says Trustee Kathy Wessel, president of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association (ICCTA). Reporters have also used the podcasts to go back and re-listen to key parts of meetings, she adds. Now the school is getting ready to televise those meetings on its own public-access station, which is rebroadcast by all the cable companies that serve DuPage County.

“We've talked about it a little, but not in a really serious vein,” Wessel says. “Maybe the first meeting or two might be slightly uncomfortable, but I don't anticipate it changing things.” Having talked to K-12 school board members who've had their own meetings televised for some time, she was advised that “after the first meeting or two, you forget the camera's even there,” she adds. “I expect that's what will happen.”

Tools & Tips

for Trustees

1

CCTV & VIDEOCONFERENCING TIPS

Broadcasting or recording board proceedings and other meetings gives those who cannot be present the opportunity to observe the meetings at a later date. When taking advantage of this technology to improve transparency, always remember:

- Everything that is stated is being recorded, so great diligence must be paid to use of language and adherence to policy.
- As a member of the board, your full attention should be given to the agenda and discussion — not to the camera.
- These technologies should be used only after verifying that policy allows for them, and making sure that any necessary changes have been made to bylaws.

2

INTERNET TIPS

Just about everything can be found online these days — and that includes every e-mail sent, and every document posted online. Here are some things to remember when taking advantage of what the Internet has to offer:

- Everything that passes through an Internet server, including e-mail messages, blog and message board posts, and even Web sites that have been visited, may be recorded forever and retrieved at any time. Use extreme care when communicating anything online, and keep in mind that what you write or attach can come back to haunt you. The good news for boards and for business is that this well-known byproduct of Internet technology has led to greater attention to staying on point and remaining accountable.
- Google and related search engines and “cloud applications” are powerful and increasingly indispensable tools for research and for certain programs. However, bear in mind that all Internet-based searches and programs are tracked. Also remember that the Internet is still a storehouse for false, unverified, and out of date information. When conducting research for presidential searches, proposals, or for any other reason, make sure to use only reputable Web sites as information sources. Also, be sure that the information is up to date, and that what you’ve found is the full story and not abridged or incomplete.

3

MOBILE PHONE/PDA TIPS

Remember pagers? Many of us remember when these devices, and then cell phones when they were new, were seen as both technological marvels — and considerable nuisances. These days, it seems everyone has at least one mobile phone and a personal digital assistant (PDA). But most of us still resent how intrusive they can be, especially during critical public events such as board meetings.

- Be considerate with mobile devices. Turn your Blackberry off during meetings whenever possible — and if you can’t, explain to your colleagues that you will limit your use as much as possible during the meeting.
- Many of us store our entire professional lives — schedules, confidential and personal e-mail messages, budgets and other attachments, and contact information — on our Blackberries or PDAs. Back up the information on your electronic devices often in case you break or lose them, and secure access to your devices with a password so strangers will not have access to important and highly sensitive information if they find it. Better yet, try to keep any highly sensitive information on a laptop computer that stands a lesser chance of being lost or stolen, and password-protect the machine.

