

To Leave a Lasting Legacy: The Value of Holding Board Retreats

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What will the current board bequest to the future board? How do you build a legacy of service worth inheriting and to what extent has your board thought about that legacy?

The foundation on which the current board operates was inherited from predecessors who pioneered the development of community college governance. Today's boards can make an even more significant contribution as they develop policies and define priorities that will shape the community college movement in this country for the foreseeable future.

We often celebrate the accomplishments of retiring presidents by acknowledging them during their tenure and use this to define their legacy. Ask current presidents about their accomplishments and they will proudly list activities such as: increased enrollment, new buildings, significant increases in the endowment, and new academic programs, among other things. However, we rarely ask the same question of the board—and we should.

Clearly, a board is an entity that will continue to exist beyond the tenure of any one member. The life cycle of the board is continuously renewed as new trustees assume responsibilities. New members continue and honor the policies and decisions made by past boards and establish new policies and directions that will be followed by future boards. The board encompasses the past and present and must also continuously prepare the college for the future. It is the board that holds the institution in trust for future generations. It is the awesome responsibility of



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the board to look into the future of the institution, the genius of community colleges' board governance.

To what extent has the current board reflected on the contributions of the past and of the footprint that they wish to leave? How can the board work effectively with the president to challenge the college to be "all that it can be?"

A retreat can provide an opportunity for the board and president to carve out time to think beyond the routine demands placed on the board and president and engage in a productive dialog on learning through new visions, strategies and practices. It is important for the board to understand its role as it relates to unifying, path finding, visioning and empowering.

Unifying: Define the work of an innovative governance body as a vehicle to bring together all of the internal and external constituencies to the best interest of students and the community.

Path Finding: Broaden horizons and acknowledge the stewardship role of the board—challenging the college to follow the path to the next stage of growth, innovation and advancement.

Visioning: Plan for the future—challenge the college to continuously aim for higher standards of quality while reaching out to serve the emerging needs of the community.

Empowering: Work for a common purpose to serve students—challenge the college to take risks and celebrate the accomplishments of the college.

It is important to evaluate the innovation patterns of the board. The board needs to understand the role it can play in fostering and creating a culture and value system



centered on common vision, courage and humility. The board must be an example by continuing to learn, grow and proactively deal with differences.

Community colleges are in the public eye, both locally and nationally. They are being recognized as key contributors to the health and well-being of the community. The result is that there is greater demand being put on the leadership role of the board—it is responsible for the appointment of the president, ensuring that the college is well managed, physical facilities and approving the budget. Boards are expected to work in partnership with the president to raise money, to approve long-range planning, to actively seek political and civic support for the college, manage communications with the media and preserve institutional autonomy as political pressure and demands increase.

A retreat provides an opportunity for the board to take stock of its contributions, establish a learning agenda around emerging issues and needs, and strengthen the board/president relationship. A retreat can serve as a forum where the leadership needs of the institution and the new and emerging leadership roles for the board can be considered.

For example, some key issues that boards may need to grapple with include:

- How will access and commitment to the “open door” policy be balanced with the demand for performance indicators, such as graduation rates?
- How do we define performance indicators while also satisfying internal and external political expectations?
- How should we handle the increasing demand/link between higher education and economic development?

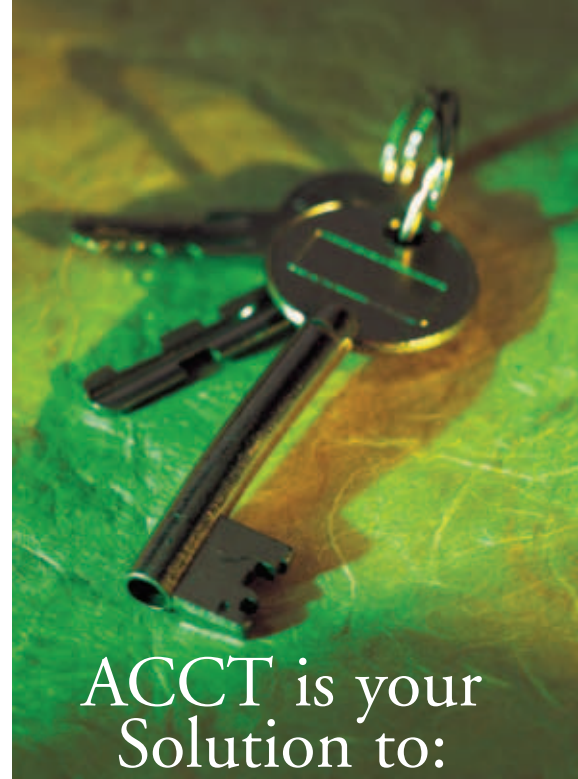
- How will we react to the growing pressure to focus college resources on growing the economy and contributing to the diversification of the local economy?
- What about affordability? How do we keep tuition down?
- What are the short-term and long-term financial implications of trying to keep up with technology?
- Funding and Cost Containment—how long can you do more with less funding?

Community colleges have increased visibility and credibility and are important players in the economic and political arena of the communities they serve. Boards operate in increasingly complex environments, often with competing interests and shrinking financial resources. The results are increasing pressure on boards.

It becomes imperative for boards to focus on continuing the important legacy passed down by the founding boards while also adjusting to the complexity and demands of today. In summary, this means that the role of the board requires a dedication of time and attention that goes beyond its regular business meetings. More importantly, it means that boards need to give serious consideration to the lasting impact that they will have on the college and the community. As governing boards, they truly have the power to alter the path of the institution. Dedicating the time to defining strategic goals and priorities for the board will help them understand and contribute to a lasting legacy. *TQ*



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