

Trusteeship

101

BOARD BASICS FROM ACCT'S
BESTSELLING *TRUSTEESHIP
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES*.

9 PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE BOARDSMANSHIP

1. Act as a unit.
2. Represent the common good.
3. Set policy direction for the college.
4. Employ, support, and evaluate the college's chief executive.
5. Define policy standards for college operations.
6. Monitor institutional performance.
7. Create a positive college climate.
8. Support and advocate the interests of the institution.
9. Lead as a thoughtful, informed team.

TODAY'S EMPHASIS ON STUDENT SUCCESS ANALYTICS, CAMPUS SECURITY MEASURES, DUAL ENROLLMENTS, AND OTHER FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE CULTURE WERE NOT AN EMPHASIS 10 YEARS AGO, BUT FIVE YEARS AGO, THE BEST BOARDS WERE BEGINNING TO REALIZE THEIR RELEVANCE AND WERE READYING TO TAKE ACTION.

GREAT COMMUNITY COLLEGES REQUIRE GREAT GOVERNING boards. But what makes a board great? And what does it mean to be an *effective* trustee? These basic questions begin the investigation into the roles and responsibilities of community college governing boards that is explored in depth by Cindra J. Smith in the seminal ACCT handbook *Trusteeship in Community Colleges*. In this first installment of our new department Trusteeship 101, we refer to Smith's text as a framework to describe the roles and responsibilities that guide ethical and effective governance.

R&R: Roles and Responsibilities

According to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, a trustee is "a person or organization that has been given responsibility for managing someone else's property or money through a trust" or "a member of a group that manages the money of an organization." Community college governing boards are entrusted with the well-being of their institutions — both the property and the mission. This is a tremendous responsibility and commitment, and one that not all newly installed trustees fully realize until they become active on their boards.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of boardsmanship that all trustees must understand and accept is that board members are not college employees, and they should not involve themselves in college administration or operations. Conversely, as Smith writes, "boards of trustees do not do the work of their institutions — they establish standards for that work through the policies they set. The boards' most powerful contribution to the college is their connections to the communities they represent. They ensure that the *community* is the focus of community colleges." This is hard work in and of itself, but it is distinctly separate from the operational work of the college.

Act as a Unit

Every board of trustees should govern as a singular unit and speak with a single voice. Every trustee brings their own perspectives to the board room and applies their own experiences and insights to the important discussions and decisions that are made. Yet the commitment to serve on a board of trustees is tied to the inextricable acknowledgement that "no individual trustee has power or authority to act on his or her own," Smith writes, "to further individual agendas or direct college employees or operations."

Individual trustees should not make commitments on behalf of the board or the college unless explicitly authorized to do so, nor should they criticize or undermine the work or decisions made by the board. The term "rogue trustee" has been used in the news media to describe board members whose personal or competing interests interfere with the board's collective interests. Every board member should be aware of the potential of wandering into this pitfall, and they should constantly ask themselves whether what they are doing is in the interest of the college or serving a personal agenda. If it is serving a personal agenda, then the trustee must realize that what is in his or her best personal interest is to set the agenda item aside — as trustees who are disruptive for reasons that don't serve the mission, vision, or goals of the college tend to undermine their own aims in the end by alienating themselves from the board.

Represent the Common Good

As with most public officials, community college trustees are elected or appointed to their positions to represent the interests of their stakeholder communities. These interests can vary greatly among the community (a good reason for boards to consist of a diverse array of trustees), and it is the role of each trustee and the board as a whole to balance the needs and interest of the community at large when developing and considering college policies. Doing this can be daunting, but Smith offers a solution to the problem of representing a broad

community and overcoming personal interests: get out into the community and meet people. Tap into community news through local news outlets and websites. Ask for and review regional demographic, economic, and social trends, as well as student success data from college staff. And talk with other community leaders and members of other college boards to gain a broader view. The “common good” is nothing more than the shared interests of the community — and the only way to understand those interests is to be deeply familiar with the people, businesses, politics, and other aspects of the community.

Set the Policy Direction

Policy is “a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business or individual.” Community college boards are the parties that set the policies for their respective institutions. These policies can be as broad as mission and vision statements and as focused as described practices to achieve goals — for example, campus security policies, or those that arise from the Policy Action Agenda developed by ACCT and our members to drive student success and completion. But as always, the devil is in the details. Trustees individually and boards collectively must consistently monitor their work to determine if they are getting too “in the weeds” — too close to operational procedures — or, conversely, if they can see the forest for the trees.

The roles of boards and chief executives are distinct and clearly defined, but trustees and presidents must share at least one uncommon trait: a visionary outlook that involves taking stock of past and present conditions and actively and continually pursuing education about the trends that drive the evolution of the community college sector. No board can hold back the progress of a glacier — but excellent boards can see the glacier’s incremental movement and stay well ahead of it for the common good. Today’s emphasis on student success analytics, campus security measures, dual enrollments, and other fundamental changes in community college culture were not an emphasis 10 years ago, but five years ago, the best boards were beginning to realize their relevance and were readying to take action.

Employ, Evaluate, and Support the Chief Executive Officer

One of the greatest responsibilities of a board of trustees is to select, evaluate, and support the college’s chief executive officer. The selection of the best president or chancellor for a particular institution requires a great number of complex factors, from vetting basic executive competencies and ethics to identifying an individual who can meet the college’s present and future needs — all while adapting its operations over time to ensure a seamless evolution. Along

the way, boards must regularly evaluate the chief executive’s performance in these areas. And perhaps more important than any other responsibility, the board must work in concert with the CEO to ensure that the college adheres to its mission and does all it can to remain solvent and meet the needs of students.

In *Trusteeship in Community Colleges*, Cindra Smith puts it this way:

The CEO and board function best as a team. The CEO is hired to carry out board policies, but trustees also look to the CEO for guidance and educational leadership. This paradoxical relationship works best when there are clear, mutually agreed-upon expectations and role descriptions. The partnership thrives on open communication, confidence, and trust. Trustees and CEOs who view each other as adversaries, who do not support one another, or who do not communicate well waste valuable energy and hurt the college’s performance and reputation.

In other words, the relationship between the community college board and the college’s CEO is akin a marriage based on trust and communication. Without these vital ingredients, the entire college family can become unstable — so investing in the board-CEO relationship should be a top priority at every single institution, and adhering to the college mission will provide ongoing stability for that relationship.

Define Policy Standards for College Operations

“Successful boards of trustees establish policies that set standards for quality, ethics, and prudence in college operations,” Smith writes, “including educational programs, personnel, and fiscal operations. These policies guide the decisions of administrators, faculty, and other staff members as they design and implement programs, curricula, services, and other activities designed to achieve policy goals.”

At the same time, the board must always bear in mind that only the college CEO is accountable to the board. While the board sets the policies and standards of the college, it should not involve itself in operations — this is the job of the CEO, and the CEO’s role in this capacity must be respected, with the board trusting the president to do the work he or she was hired to undertake. Smith notes that in some cases, boards may be required by law to approve major personnel actions — but even in these cases, management of personnel is the responsibility of the CEO, not the board.

Fiscal Health and Stability

Community colleges are public institutions that operate largely on public funds. As the guardians of the public’s investment in secondary education, governing boards set

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policies relating to budgets, assets, and other financial matters. Smith writes that

Boards are also responsible for establishing standards on how funds are managed and expended and how assets are protected. Board policies address topics such as investments, cash flow management, spending authority, internal and external audits, loans, debt, insurance, and security. Policies on programs, personnel, and finance express board values and expectations for ethical and legal operations, the quality and treatment of personnel, and the prudent and wise use of public funds. Once these values and expectations are established, boards delegate significant authority to the CEO, allowing the CEO and staff the flexibility they need to exercise professional judgment. State boards usually have very broad policies and standards, delegating substantial authority to local entities to further define local policies.

Create a Positive Climate

While “setting a positive climate” may sound like an abstract concept, doing so is actually a fundamental imperative on which the success of both the board itself and the college hinges. If you think of a board as the proverbial well-oiled machine, harmony among board members serves as the oil that keeps the gears from locking in place and holding up operations. Although the board is comprised of citizen volunteers, board members are expected to conduct themselves with the same level of professionalism, mutual respect, and courtesy that is expected of college staff. Some personality- and perspective-based challenges are bound to arise from time to time, and these should be viewed as opportunities to consider diverse points of view that can be anchored and tempered by always keeping in mind the college mission, vision, and goals. Smith writes that “boards

of trustees create a positive climate when they focus on the future, act with integrity, support risk-taking, and challenge the CEO and college staff to strive for excellence” — all while respecting the CEO and staff and trusting them to carry out the work for which they were hired.

All trustees should consistently ask themselves if their contributions to the board are in fact contributing to the mission, vision, and goals of the college, and to the best interests of the students and community. Individual trustee and full board self-evaluations should be conducted at least annually to gauge the performance and compatibility of the board, and regular board retreats facilitated by a disinterested third party are extremely useful in gaining a “reality check.” Without these consistent assessments, differences of opinion among board members may become exaggerated conflicts, unethical behaviors may go unnoticed or unaddressed, and professionalism and civility may give way to familial arguments and dysfunctional nitpicking. These degradations can cost the college immensely by diverting the board’s attentions from its duties to itself. A positive board climate is a civil climate with high and well-defined ethical standards. Every board member should always remember that the time he or she invests and the decisions and actions made and taken by the board have direct effects on students who attend the college to improve their educations, their incomes, and to expand their minds. This is too great a responsibility to jeopardize with personal conflicts.

Monitor Performance

Boards must regularly monitor and assess adherence to policies and progress toward goals. Typically, staff will brief or submit reports to the board about college finances, as well as specific programs and services. Third-party reports will be

provided by accreditors, auditors, and others. Such monitoring is vital to determine the relevance and success of new areas; for established goals, boards should compare current data with previous reports with an eye toward identifying positive and negative trends and making any necessary modifications for improved outcomes.

In addition to their own college's data, many boards also review metrics from similar institutions to gain a broader perspective. With the advent of recent student success initiatives and improved analytics mechanisms, many college boards receive frequent reports about a variety of initiatives. Boards should use these reports judiciously to gain greater insights into the college's performance, identify areas that need improvement, and assess how well policies and practices are improving student outcomes.

Support and Be Advocates For the College

Trustees are the primary advocates for their colleges — in a variety of capacities. As locally elected or appointed officials, trustees are vital links between their institutions and the surrounding communities. While the board must act as a collective entity, every trustee is an ambassador for his or her college, and trustees are charged with the responsibility of promoting the college and its interests within every part of the community.

In addition to this public relations role, trustees must serve in a more official advocacy capacity by securing support for the college from local, state, and national policymakers and building relationships and partnerships with businesses, industries, and governments. For this reason, every trustee needs to be intimately familiar with the college, its student population, programs and services, areas of special service to the community, strong industry ties, and more. Trustees should also understand the legislative process and call, write, and meet regularly with their local, state, and federal elected officials to convey the value of the college to the community so that legislatures will understand why it is necessary to support the institution and its students.

Lead as a Thoughtful, Educated Team

As discussed earlier, a board is a collective entity that makes collective decisions and takes collective actions. The foundation of an effective board is its ability to cooperate as a team and to convert the diversity of its trustees' experiences, skill sets, and opinions into complementary strengths. Every board member should be thoroughly committed to the best interests of the college and confident that every trustee shares this commitment.

Disagreements are inevitable among any group of people — but disharmony is not. Smith writes that effective trustees “listen well, ask thoughtful questions, analyze options, think critically,

and clarify their most important values and priorities. They explore issues thoroughly and make policy decisions based on thoughtful deliberation and comprehensive understanding.” Remember that thoughtful leadership begins with a stable and positive climate.

While serving on a board of trustees is a voluntary commitment, doing so effectively requires special knowledge and, to some extent, specialized skills. New trustees should be thoroughly oriented to their college and board culture, as well as to the roles, responsibilities, “dos,” and “do nots” of serving on a board. All trustees, no matter how long they have served, should likewise participate in continuing education as often as possible — by reading books, attending seminars, workshops, and conferences, viewing webinars, and taking every available opportunity to understand both the evolving roles of board members and the evolving landscape of higher education.

Even with the best of intentions, trustees may clash over differences of opinions about what they believe is best for the college. But when discussions and decisions are guided by a thorough understanding of the community and the higher education sector, and informed by data, it is always possible to function as an effective team.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

From the basic “job description” of serving as a trustee to parliamentary procedure to handling interpersonal relationships among board members, we hear from a lot of members about what they need to know to be the best board member they can be. Have we heard from you?

As we focus more and more on innovations and trends in the educational sector, remember that ACCT is also a primary resource for information about how to work effectively as a board member — no question or thought is too great or too small to ask.

Send us your questions, tell us about the challenges you've encountered, or just let us know what boardroom-related topics you and your fellow trustees need to know more about. We'll do our best to address them in upcoming issues of *Trustee Quarterly*, the *Trustee Talk* newsletter, and throughout our educational services.