

# Vote of No Confidence: Can You Rebuild Trust?

By Narcisa Polonio

**B**OARDS OF TRUSTEES MUST BE mindful of changes and trends regarding the presidency and the individuals who serve in this role. A growing number of current presidents will exit the presidency and enter into retirement, which is complicated by the impression of a growing number of reports of campus conflict, leading to presidents receiving votes of no confidence. Periods of leadership transition or disenchantment in the president are two of the most difficult situations for a board to encounter.

Votes of no confidence carry a symbolic effect and are not restricted to higher education. On occasion police chiefs receive votes of no confidence from the rank and file. Employees of the United Nations have also voted no confidence in their leadership. Even the Congress of the U.S. can threaten to take votes of no confidence. In higher education, it is a vote of disenchantment, not always calling for the resignation of the president, but serving as a wake-up call to the management of the college.

In 2001, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) forecasted a large exodus of presidents. Six years later, the 20th edition of the American College

President Study (ACPS), by the American Council of Education (ACE), also reported an expected large turnover at the executive level throughout higher education.

The average age of presidents increased from 52 in 1986 to 60 in 2006. Almost half of all current presidents are 61 or older. During the same period, the average age of community college presidents increased from 51 to 59. In 1986, 47 percent of all community colleges presidents were 50 or younger. Twenty years later, that figure had fallen only 10 percent. Given this information, boards must work through potential transitions and be more proactive in assessing internal relationships and morale.

Heading off negative actions of this type is what William G. Tierney, the director of the Center for Higher Education and Policy Analysis at the University of Southern California called "Averting the Nuclear Option." Boards need to be vigilant in their effort to detect early signs of discontent by faculty, students and staff.

One should not underestimate the effect of a vote of no confidence act on a college, the president and/or the board. It can be devastating, defeating and embarrassing. For the board it can lead to division among

the trustees, confusion and politicizing of issues. Through quick action the board can take steps to establish the tone for the college during this critical time. The board has a responsibility to emphasize that the vote is symbolic and has no official impact. The authority to make a decision regarding the future of the president is solely in the hands of the board.

It is advisable to avoid a vote of no confidence. However, often it cannot be avoided if the president is trying to implement necessary but unpopular changes, address financial limitations or carryout the mandate established by the board. Nevertheless it is possible to take preventive measures. The board can play an important and effective role in neutralizing conflict and addressing disenchantment.

Public criticism or accusations of poor leadership, ineffective communication and bad management from inside the college can be embarrassing and will place the president in a vulnerable situation, perhaps even losing his or her job. A disruptive event can paralyze the administration, damage the reputation of the college within the community and deteriorate the confidence of the key stakeholders. Therefore the reaction of both the president and board is important for damage control.

## Contributing Factors in Votes of No Confidence

- Allowing the college to erode.
- Failure to align institutional priorities with the college's mission.
- Difficult contract negotiations.
- Financial difficulties.
- Lingering mistrust.
- Insufficient or disregarded consultation with faculty.
- Disregard for the principles of shared governance.
- Declining enrollment.
- Tenure denials strongly supported by faculty.
- Favoring new professors over senior scholars.
- Dedicating resources to projects or ventures not deemed critical (planning to build a golf course, fixing presidential home, elaborate and expensive social events).
- Lack of collegiality.
- Failure to communicate.
- Ineffective leadership during a crisis.
- Disconnection from the college.
- Unethical behavior.
- Expression of beliefs that are contrary to the values of the college.
- Charges of sexual harassment.
- Failure to inform college or community of a crime on campus.

## Advice on surviving a vote of no confidence

The board should acknowledge the concerns and help the institution to rebuild trust. To do this effectively the board needs to understand the emotional state of the president, understand both the motivation behind the decision and the potential fall-out, be media savvy and be prepared to reassure both the college and community. The board needs to provide the right balance by supporting the president, assuring all constituencies and keeping appropriate governmental authorities apprised. The board and president should not overreact and must stay above the fray.

Richard M. Ayres, director of the Center for Labor Management Studies, in his article titled "Avoiding a Vote of No Confidence (and Surviving if One Occurs)," provides some advice to police chiefs that is applicable to presidents. The president should ascertain the vote's validity by doing an honest assessment of his or her own performance and be ready to admit mistakes, promise corrective action or clarify the situation by setting the record straight.

Above all, avoid becoming emotional and lashing out at accusers. Demonstrate continuing support and interest in the mission of the college, the students and staff. The president should set the stage, facilitate a smooth transition and help the college refocus on teaching and learning.

Using the assistance of neutral parties can be very helpful in maneuvering beyond the crisis. Convening an independent outside review panel of experts or involving respected senior faculty are two potential strategies for jump-starting the healing process. It is important to work collegially and constructively to avoid confrontations. It takes courage and strength of character to forgive and admit mistakes. The board and president can help the institution to move forward, learn from experience and recommit to work together to serve the students and the community.



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## Preventing and Mitigating Negative Votes

### What the board should do:

- Maintain perspective. Understand the meaning of such action and why it happens (refer to previous articles for further guidance to the board).
- Set clear goals and priorities with president and review periodic progress.
- Conduct regular presidential evaluations: Assess the status of the college, progress towards achieving goals and priorities, presidential performance — review effectiveness of management and leadership style.
- Understand the health and welfare of the college.
- In consultation with president, determine the appropriate level of involvement at the state and national level by the president.
- Don't become a "rubber stamp" board. Study and reflect on important issues, carry-out due diligence.
- Conduct effective board meetings.
- Understand the susceptibility of the presidency.
- Be strategic and understand all sides of an issue before making a decision.
- Understand the internal culture.
- Work in partnership with the president.
- Understand and prepare for "pull back" from internal constituencies on difficult and controversial issues.

### What the president should do:

- Care about the college and about the students, faculty and staff.
- Lead by example.
- Earn the trust and support of faculty and staff.
- Demonstrate ongoing commitment and be consistent in decision making.
- Be sensitive to the culture, values and history of the college.
- Practice effective formal and informal communication.
- Avoid becoming isolated.
- Understand interest and pressure groups within the college.
- Continuously assess the effectiveness of your management style and that of the executive team.
- Be honest about your own achievements and accomplishments on behalf of the college.
- Is collegiality important to you? How do internal constituencies define collegial behavior and action?
- Are you visible and accessible?
- How much time do you spend serving on national boards? Does it benefit the college or your résumé?
- Don't use public funds to enhance your life style or personal gains.
- During a crisis, take charge and be visible.
- Be impartial and avoid favoritism.
- Don't be rigid.
- Demonstrate a willingness to listen.
- The old adage applies "learn to make friends and influence people."
- Be open to alternate views.
- Encourage people.
- Avoid playing favorites.