

TRUST IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE BOARDS

Effective trusteeship ensures that boards fully represent the interests of their communities and serve the community college mission.

By Jee Hang Lee and Rose Benavidez



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COMMUNITY COLLEGES ALWAYS HAVE BEEN RESPONSIVE to their communities' needs and to changes in workforce demands. Today's community college leaders have proven to be even more nimble and adaptable than could have been predicted, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic with extraordinary grace and responsiveness. They swiftly moved classes online with little existing infrastructure, deploying their acute understanding of the challenges students face in their lives by providing services to take care of them and keep them engaged with higher education.

As COVID-19 has abated, rapid change has become a matter of course. Community college leaders now need to not only plan to adapt to unanticipated crises, but also address an endless parade of major changes. For years, a looming community college CEO exodus has created a need for new pipelines to the presidency — and we are addressing that. More recently, declining enrollments, due in part to the aftermath of the pandemic and to declining birthrates, have created an urgent need both to be creative and more proactive about recruiting and retaining students, as well as adjusting business models to remain financially solvent in a future with potentially fewer students. Another contributor to lower enrollments is an incredible shift in generational perceptions of the value of higher education. More younger people than ever are questioning whether college will serve them well.

It is up to us to restore the faith in higher education through demonstrable outcomes — no easy task in a world as complex, variable, and ever-changing as ours is today. Beyond this, other societal, political, and other evolutions are demanding attention and resources, forcing community college leaders to balance countless competing forces while always prioritizing serving their students well.

It's a lot to contend with. The only way to maintain sustainable stability while powering through tempest after tempest is for well-functioning visionary boards, action-oriented chief executives, and thorough accreditors to work in concert to keep systems running smoothly while making forward progress.

Effective Community College Trusteeship

Effective trusteeship empowers colleges to operate relatively autonomously and to focus on the college community's immediate needs. An effective community college board serves the role of a wise counselor who guides the college's CEO with the benefit of many minds speaking with a single voice, supporting the CEO, asking incisive questions, keeping the institution

accountable to its policies and accreditors' requirements, and serving as a consistent, reliable, and trustworthy advisor.

A functional board ideally can accomplish at least two things at once. The first is to support and guide the college CEO's leadership without disrupting any of the good work being done by the college. The second is to advance the college's work by examining outcomes and policies, asking good questions, and encouraging the CEO to develop and evolve the college in ways that improve student success and close equity gaps.

To do this, community college board members must understand the unique identity and role that community colleges serve. Community colleges are engines of socioeconomic opportunity, mobility, advancement, and evolution. They are also the means responsible for offering endless encouragement and educational opportunities to *any individual who chooses to pursue higher education*.

Community colleges are inclusive and encouraging at their very foundations — the values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and equal opportunity have been rooted in our business model from the beginning. In order for community college trustees to meet their responsibilities as board members, they must understand that community colleges are markedly different than selective four-year institutions in significant ways. Considerations and decisions must be made with this in mind. Our colleges exist to serve so-called traditional students who enroll immediately following high-school graduation — and they also exist to serve those who take different paths, sometimes years or decades after any formal schooling. Community colleges welcome every student, and most offer support such as childcare or food pantries to students who would not be able to participate without them.

Because the principles and values that undergird community college boards approach what some may consider to be idealistic, ostensibly offering nearly all possibilities to nearly all people, these values often can be challenged by human nature. Sometimes, these challenges are created by so-called "rogue trustees" who are not faithful to their sworn governance duties, and who do not honor the promise to represent the interests and objectives of the board as a single unit rather than a collection of individual opinions and agendas. Other times, one or more trustees simply have irreconcilable differences in their respective points of view that are out of sync with the objectives of the board as a governing body. These and other disruptions can and do occur among boards of trustees, so it is necessary to consider not only what boards *should do*, but what to do when boards get off track.

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Before we discuss some qualities of ineffective trusteeship and how it can affect the college, it's imperative to understand how the *trust* got into *trustees* and what an effective board sounds like and does.

Foundational Values

When NWCCU President Sonny Ramaswamy offered us an opportunity to write an article about why governance is critically important to student success, the first thought that came to mind was a term ubiquitous to governance that is often overlooked: trust.

Trust is the foundation upon which governing boards are built — and it's not as vague a value as it might sound. The trust-based expectations placed upon board members are explicitly elucidated in their **duties of care, loyalty, and obedience**, which together describe board members' **fiduciary responsibilities**.

At ACCT, we often encounter people who are familiar with the term fiduciary, and who take the term quite seriously, believing that *fiduciary* is synonymous with *financial responsibility*. It's understandable. The words fiduciary and financial often are used together, and they appear and sound as if they may have a common root.

However, every board member should understand that they *function as fiduciaries* to their institutions — obviously not as “financial experts,” but as *trusted* individuals who are obligated to act on behalf of others. The term “fiduciary” is both a noun and an adjective, derived from the Latin word *fiducia*, which means “trust.” It is the basis of the term “trustee,” and all good trustees are individuals of impeccable character exemplified by care for and loyalty to the communities and institutions they serve. Responsibility for financial oversight is certainly part of fiduciary responsibility, but there's much more to it, and it is essential that board members understand that their commitments go farther and deeper than just financial oversight.

Standards of Good Practice for Trustee Boards

ACCT's board of directors in 2000 adopted *Standards of Good Practice for Trustee Boards*, a set of principles that all community college boards members (and their CEOs) must understand and to which they must adhere. According to these standards, every community college board must:

- Derive its authority from the community and always act as an advocate on behalf of the entire community.
- Clearly define and articulate its role.

- Create and maintain a spirit of true cooperation and a mutually supportive relationship with its CEO.
- Always strive to differentiate between external and internal processes in the exercise of its authority.
- Engage in a regular and ongoing process of in-service training and continuous improvement, as a board and as individual board members.
- Come to each meeting prepared and ready to debate issues fully and openly.
- Encourage all members to vote their consciences and to then support the decision or policy made by the board as a whole.
- Exemplify ethical behavior and conduct that is above reproach.
- Remain always accountable to the community.
- Honestly debate the issues affecting its community and speak with one voice once a decision or policy is made.

Disagreements among board members are inevitable, but such disagreements should never approach a level that puts the objectives of the board in question or prevents the board or the college from performing their duties.

Common Challenges

When a community college board member takes the oath of service to their institution as a trustee, they must surrender personal interests and agendas — something that can be agonizingly challenging at times for many — and instead act solely in the interest of their college and its students, and never in their own personal interest.

Even more challenging is the obligation of every individual trustee to support every board action once approved by the board. Although a board is a collective body made of individual trustees who hold their own individual views, values, and interests, a *board* must operate with a focused vision, clearly articulated values, and common interests. While board members as individual human beings speak with their own voices, the collective board must speak with only one voice, and that voice must speak on behalf of the board's explicitly articulated mission, vision, and values regardless of any individual differences of opinion among trustees.

Operating in this way may feel contrary to human nature for some, most especially those who care deeply enough about anything to volunteer their time and energies to serving its interests. The fact is harmonious action is the only way to govern well, given that differences of opinion always will exist among different board members. Trustees

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should only become board members if they can truly commit to selflessly serve their college community's interests — that's it, no other reason. Board members will otherwise run the risk of becoming a disruption to the college's work in service to its students, and subsequently failing at the board's commitment to its college and community.

Means of Resolution

ACCT is often contacted by individuals — sometimes board members, sometimes journalists — who ask what can be done to remove a “rogue trustee” from a board. Those who are appointed by their governors can only be removed by the governor who appointed them; in the case of elected board members, generally, the only way to remove them would be a recall and re-election. Both scenarios for removal are extremely rare.

Instead, most boards are able to find common ground through board retreats and developmental workshops facilitated by a neutral third party such as ACCT. Resolution almost always can be reached through ensuring that all board members have a deep understanding of their oath of office, including their roles, responsibilities, and limitations as board members, and by keeping the board focused on the college's mission, vision, and values, along with the board's strategic plan and policies. Regular board development efforts are a way to stay on track, but even just regularly charging all board members to assess whether the board is adhering to the standards of good practice above can help to resolve conflicts and concerns and to focus the board's work.

Serving on any board is a real commitment to show up and participate, and one with unanticipated challenges that will inevitably occur, but it's also a rewarding commitment. ACCT is proud to represent so many members who have served their boards for decades, becoming ever more deeply engaged with their communities and ever more deeply committed to supporting their institutions' CEOs, keeping the board on track, and operating as an asset to the college while keeping an eye out for liabilities.

Speaking with One Voice — For Entire Communities

Perhaps what is most important about elected and appointed community college boards is that they represent their communities' interests. The term “community college” is so ubiquitous that most people have a fully formed idea of what a community college is and does, and that idea usually sets aside our colleges' *raison d'être*: **community**. When we talk about social equity, the best way to make advancements is from within communities, and who better to identify and meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students in

their communities than people who live among them? And who has more at stake to see these individuals succeed within their shared communities? We don't have to tell you the answer, but we will: No one. This is the ‘lay person's expertise’ of every board member, regardless of their professional backgrounds or any credential.

While we all know that sausage making is a messy business, the idea of board members being elected or appointed from within their communities and given the highest roles of oversight at a college that serves their communities is an elegant and beautiful design. Accreditors play a vital role in keeping colleges accountable about implementing sound and sustainable academic and training programs, adhering to regulations, and working in the interests of their students. In essence, accreditation is the brain that collaborates with the heart of the community-based governance system and the hands of the college's administration and faculty.

There are many ways to gauge the success of any given college board, but the ones most specific to community college boards are to assess how well they represent the interests of their communities, how well they serve the community college mission, and how well their individual members set aside their egos and their personal and political agendas to serve their communities' interests and their colleges' missions.

College leadership can and should operate like complex symphonies, but on occasion the various players may fall out of harmony. Like all great conductors, we at ACCT can provide boards the perfect notes by simply reaching out to us for guidance or checking in with the *Standards of Good Practice for Trustee Boards* to maintain balance, position themselves as one of their college's strongest assets, and avoid becoming liabilities to their communities.



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