

ON THE ROAD: THE DOS & DON'TS *of Trustee Travel Expenses*

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES THROUGHOUT the country selflessly volunteer countless hours to govern their colleges, typically without compensation, except for reimbursement for travel expenses. But to protect the goodwill efforts of trustees, it is imperative that boards put into place, and that trustees follow, procedures and guidelines to account for travel and allowable expenses.

Travel is a necessary component of every trustee's job description. Board members must travel within their communities to establish and maintain relationships with local businesses and other stakeholders, as well as throughout the state and nationally to advocate on their respective colleges' behalf. Travel is also vital for education and networking. ACCT sessions that begin at 7 a.m. are reliably attended by hundreds of trustees eager to learn and share ideas. The Annual ACCT Leadership Congress, Community College National Legislative Summit, and Governance Leadership Institutes are programmed from beginning to end with information, new ideas, and networking opportunities for trustees, and it is important that travel for these and other reasons that benefit the

college are well documented so that they are not misconstrued as opportunities for vacation at the college's expense.

Dos: Procedures and Guidelines

At a minimum, trustees should be required to follow the same procedures and guidelines required of college employees. For example, Desert Community College District in California has comprehensive travel procedures based on the California Education Code, Section 87032:

The governing board of a community college district shall provide for the payment of the actual and necessary expenses, including traveling expenses, of any employee of the district incurred in the course of performing services for the district, whether within or outside the district, under the direction of the governing board. The board may authorize an advance of funds to cover such necessary expense. Such advance shall be repaid or adjusted upon filing of a regular claim for the actual and necessary expenses incurred. The governing board may direct any employee of the district to attend any convention or conference or to visit schools for the discussion or observation of any school matter appertaining to the duties of the employee or any question of interest to the district.

Necessary documentation usually includes destination, dates, the purpose of travel with evidence, such as a conference brochure, the estimated travel, lodging, meal, and registration costs, and an

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explanation of any other anticipated expenditures. In addition, the guidelines should detail the approval process, and definitions of gratuities (i.e., allowable percentage to tip), as well as detail prohibited expenses, examples of which are detailed below.

Dos: Reimbursable Expenses

Tarrant County College District in Texas shared the following general language and guidance for compensation and expenses:

Board members shall be reimbursed for reasonable expenses incurred in carrying out board business at the board's request and for reasonable expenses incurred while attending meetings and conventions as official representatives of the board. Travel by board members shall be approved by the board president (chair) and limited to issues that affect the college district. Reimbursement by the business office shall be made upon presentation of appropriate documentation of receipts.

The Tarrant County College District reimburses board members for the use of their personal cars at a mileage rate approved by the board or for the actual cost of commercial transportation plus parking and taxi fees, as well as expenses for lodging, meals, and other incidental expenses. Following the same procedure required for all employees of the district, board members are required to file statements and, to the extent feasible, attach receipts documenting the actual expenses for which reimbursement is requested. The board also has a provision that upon returning from meetings, the attendee is required to share the benefits of the meeting whenever possible, including through oral or written reports.

Don'ts: Generally Non-Reimbursable Expenses

The following travel expenses are generally considered ineligible for reimbursement:

- Housing or travel costs incurred from extending travel for sightseeing or other personal reasons, including visits with family or friends in the area
- Alcoholic beverages
- Entertainment expenses (i.e., in-room movies, snacks, room service not covered by per diem allowance)
- Transportation to/from any entertainment or recreational venue
- Conference-sponsored tours or side trips
- Traffic or parking tickets received while on travel
- Additional mileage beyond what is necessary for the business portion of the trip
- Mileage expenses for the use of personal vehicles should be charged at the rate set by the college and not exceed the cost of economy airfare to the same destination.
- When opting to use a personal automobile for a destination that would be otherwise reachable by a commercial flight, en-route meals and lodging should not be charged to the college.

- When using a personal automobile, a person may be reimbursed for either the cost of mileage or gasoline, depending on the college's policy, but never both.

The Importance of a Guidebook

While most aspects of travel expense reimbursement are common sense, any question that is likely to arise should be proactively and specifically addressed in a reference manual, which should be kept by every member of the board, as well as the professional board staff and the college president. While the basic "dos and don'ts" are fairly cut-and-dry, exceptions may occur that should be addressed by the manual. Examples of such questions are:

- What happens when a trustee is unable to attend an event because of reasons beyond his or her control? Who should be responsible for expenses incurred, and who is responsible for canceling and negotiating any recouped costs, when possible? Is any documentation of the reason for not attending required?
- Is it appropriate to take a taxi, shuttle service, or limousine when a rental car is available and more cost-effective?
- What factors should be considered when determining the most economical mode of transportation to and from locations?
- What are the guidelines for expenses when a trustee brings a spouse or other family members to a destination for which he or she is traveling on behalf of the college?

The answers to these and related questions vary at the discretion of each college or college district. For example, College of the Desert stipulates that reimbursement is limited to a single-occupancy hotel room and any additional costs must be covered by the individual. Some colleges allow for miscellaneous expenses such as postage, photocopies, presentation-related expenses, and a "safe-on-arrival" personal call home, while others do not. Whatever decision is made by the college, it must be established in written policy to avoid confusion and unnecessary miscommunications that may cause friction among board members and the administration — or even undue criticism from the public and local press.

Traveling is an obligation and, to many, a privilege afforded to trustees. But without clear guidelines, travel expenses can be misunderstood and knowingly or unknowingly abused. There is no reason for this ever to happen; it is the college's and the board's responsibility to set clear guidelines for travel expense reimbursement and follow them.