

GOAL SETTING AS A BOARD: THE PATH TO POLICY

The San Diego Community College District governing board uses an annual process to set the direction without overstepping its bounds.

By Bernie Rhinerson

WHEN I BECAME A TRUSTEE SEVEN YEARS AGO, I QUICKLY learned through ACCT and my state association board training sessions that community college boards were “policy” boards and that our role was to set policy and not to get involved in the administration of our colleges.

Staying on a policy level is rule number one for effective board governance. But once trustees accept this role, how can a community college board actually adopt new policies to guide their colleges and support our shared mission to support student success?

This article details three avenues to policy setting, two of which offer limited opportunities to shape policy, while the third — goal setting as a board — provides the best path to shape policy.

The Budget Process

One of our major responsibilities as community college trustees is to review and approve an annual budget for our colleges. Budgets reflect the policy priorities of a college and require many decisions on where to deploy resources and where to reduce or restrict funding.

Boards have two opportunities to impact the budget process. The first is to set policy regarding priorities, such as new initiatives to fund Promise or free-tuition programs or to establish special reserves for new impacts like retirement-system demands. It is expected that these priorities be represented in the college budget.

Second, boards have a budget approval or adoption process. Boards see proposed budgets after priorities and decisions are set by college leadership and the shared decision-making process of campus governance. After that budget development process, there are still limited opportunities for a board to set policy by making final budget decisions. While the degree of board budget oversight varies by state and district, there is usually an opportunity for the board to set policy by making the final tough decisions on resource allocation. Unfortunately, all too often this involves adjusting or concurring with administration recommendations for needed cuts in response to declining revenues.

Board Policy Documents and Administrative Guidelines

Most, if not all, boards have a set of policies. The San Diego Community College District, for example, has a complete set of board policies covering a full range of district operations, including administrative services, board operations, governance, facilities, human resources, IT, and instructional services. For our district, board policies represent “*the voice of the Board of Trustees and defines the general goals and acceptable practices for the operation of the District. It implements federal and state laws and regulations. The Board of Trustees, through policy, delegates authority to and through the Chancellor to administer the District. The Chancellor and District employees are responsible to reasonably interpret Board policy as well as other relevant laws and regulations that govern the District*” (see www.sdccd.edu/about/leadership/board-of-trustees/board-policies/index.aspx).

These policies are typically reviewed by staff periodically and brought to the board for approval. From my experience, I expect that most trustees have little detailed knowledge of their own board policies and only refer to them rarely if circumstances come up where a review is needed.

But there are occasional opportunities that fall within the board role to create and review policies. This type of policy can be an opportunity to implement a desired change or to comply with state and federal directives. As an example, our district has a Board Policy (BP 0505) that designates the district as a *Smoke and Tobacco Free District* that prohibits smoking and the use of any tobacco product on all properties owned or controlled by the district. Over the years, that policy has certainly transformed staff and student behavior in the interests of public health.

Board Goals: The Best Path to Policy for Trustees

At a recent meeting of community college trustees from around the nation, I took an informal poll, asking a few trustees if their boards created an annual board goals document and what

types of goals they set. The responses to my informal poll were interesting, ranging from: “no, we don’t set separate board goals” to “yes, we have an extensive annual goal setting process for our board.” While I found a range of approaches to board goal setting in my little poll, I also concluded that most trustees don’t see the possibilities and potential offered by a board goal setting process as a path to explore and initiate new and innovative policies for our colleges.

Each year, our five-member board at the San Diego Community College District prepares a detailed set of Board Goals that sets priorities for our chancellor and gets translated into her annual goals. These goals are developed by a board subcommittee and approved each year in conjunction with our annual board self-evaluation process (see our goals at www.sdccd.edu/about/leadership/board-of-trustees/board-goals.aspx).

Our board goals are aligned with accreditation standards which are referenced throughout the document. They also are consistent with and supportive of the district’s five-year strategic plan.

This type of annual goal setting process gives trustees the best opportunity to bring forward new policy ideas and innovations that could be explored by college leadership and then brought back to the board for consideration and adoption.

Opportunities for Innovation and New Policy Directions

The board goal setting process offers trustees an opportunity to present new policy ideas to their colleagues and college leadership through a process that keeps a board in the policy setting role rather than the administration role.

In San Diego, one of our board members attended an ACCT Leadership Congress session on Open Educational Resources (OER) and was excited about their potential to reduce the overall costs of education for our students by reducing textbook costs. After returning from the Congress, the trustee suggested that we include a new policy goal of increasing the use of OER resources in our district in our annual goal setting process. This new goal was adopted two years ago as follows:

*Ensure that a strategic approach is developed to reduce escalating textbook costs for students in the San Diego Community College District (*Strategic goals 1-2; ACCJC Accreditation Standards IV.C.1; IV.C.4-5, IV.C.8) by:*

1. *Ensuring a program to introduce Open Educational Resources (OER) to all of SDCCD’s campuses.*
2. *Encouraging voluntary faculty participation in the pilot program, with the goal of achieving 15% of available classes as OER compatible.*
3. *Receiving regular reports regarding the progress of the program.*

This new policy goal remains in our annual board goals document, and progress is monitored through annual reports presented to the board each year. As a result of this board goal, our district has substantially increased OER in class sections in all of our district colleges and as a result reduced the costs of education for our students.

This year, our board continues to use the annual board goal setting process as a path to policy innovation. We are working

collaboratively with our chancellor to implement new policies for environmental sustainability and to address climate change. In our 2019/20 Board Goals, the board subcommittee has proposed expanded goals as follows:

Ensure that the District remains a prominent leader in sustainable practices (Strategic goals 4 and 5; ACCJC Accreditation Standard IV.C.1; IV.C.4-5.) by:

- a) *Ensuring that the District continually assesses alternative opportunities that would reduce the District’s overall impact on the environment.*
 - i. *Explore the possible implementation of a single-use plastics use policy, similar to the policy adopted by the California State University system.*
 - ii. *Explore the possible conversion of the District’s vehicle fleet to electric vehicles over time.*
- b) *Supporting the District’s participation in regional climate change coordinating efforts.*
- c) *Receiving regular reports on the progress of climate literacy educational initiatives and programs within the SDCCD.*
- d) *Ensuring that all buildings built with Proposition S and N monies be LEED certified or equivalent and that all due diligence be made to use green products and materials whenever economically feasible.*

Board goals can also be set in collaboration with the K-12 school districts serving your college district. The SDCCD board has collaborated with the board of the San Diego Unified School District to develop joint goals benefiting the broader community. Examples of our joint goals include a specific goal to develop middle college partnerships and to expand opportunities for dual high school/college enrollment. As a result of this joint goal setting process, thousands of students are being given opportunities that they would not have had without the shared vision of the two governing boards.

While this type of goal setting does set a policy direction for the district, it is important that goals be set in collaboration with the chancellor or president to ensure that they are realistic and attainable. Aspirational goals are best set as exploratory, giving district leadership the opportunity to explore their feasibility before final policy adoption, as demonstrated by our request to “explore” a single-use plastic policy and an electric vehicle fleet for the district in the goals listed above.

Community college trustees have an opportunity to bring new ideas and new policy direction to their colleges through the board goal setting process. If Board goals are set in alignment with a college strategic plan, accreditation standards and in collaboration with your chancellor or president, new policies suggested by individual Board members can become positive contributions for students and the communities we serve.



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