

FOUR QUESTIONS

THAT EVERY NEW COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE NEEDS TO ASK

FOCUSING YOUR WORK AS A TRUSTEE IS KEY TO BECOMING
A CONTRIBUTING MEMBER OF YOUR BOARD TEAM.

BY BERNIE RHINERSON

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU WERE JUST ELECTED (OR APPOINTED) to be a trustee of your local community college board. With the November elections now behind us, there are literally hundreds of newly elected community college trustees who will begin their new role as a board trustee in 2019. Each of them ran for this office to do a public service and to help their community and the students of their local community college.

New trustees come onto their boards with a wide range of experiences, some with experience in education and others with experience in private business or other sectors. Each trustee brings a unique set of skills to their board and his or her own values and interests to this new role. When I was elected to my board in 2012, I came in with a great deal of enthusiasm, a desire to make a positive contribution, and lots of questions.

I joined a board with four seasoned trustees who had decades of combined experience leading our district. We also had a long-serving chancellor with years of experience as a community college administrator. I was the new trustee, full of questions and energy, and ready to get to work.

After a couple of meetings, I realized the best advice I had been given was to "slow down." There is no way anyone can

learn and understand this complex educational system we call "community colleges" overnight. I learned over time that the best way to become a member of the board, and not just an individual trustee, was to spend more time listening and less time asking questions whose answers everyone else already knew. The best way to build a rapport with your fellow board members and with your chancellor or president is to ask your questions in separate briefing meetings and not to take up valuable board meeting time with questions on complex topics that will require detailed answers.

I have learned to focus my work as a board trustee on four key questions. My advice to all newly elected and appointed board trustees around the country is to use these four questions as your guide to becoming an effective trustee and a contributing member of your board team.

1. What is the best way to get my questions answered?

I believe learning how and when to ask questions is the most important skill a new board trustee must develop. As a new trustee, you will have questions come up in your mind constantly, so this is a process question that is especially important. But even

as an experienced trustee, I still find that I ask myself this question every time I am interested in a college issue or policy.

New trustees should ask this question — “what is the best way to get my questions answered?” — of their chancellor or college president at their very first meeting after the election. Hopefully, you will learn the best ways to get information without becoming a pest or a burden to your college staff. Good governance practice teaches us that all informational requests should be directed from the board member to the college president or chancellor in a multi-college district. That process will allow your college president to ensure that your questions get answered and to manage the workload of college leadership staff.

Recognizing this trustee-president relationship is paramount, because as a trustee you will find yourself in informal conversations and possibly in email discussions with college staff. It is important to remember that anytime a trustee asks for something or asks a question, it is seen by staff as a priority. Often to please a trustee, staff may take on the added work of responding when there are always other parts of their workload and priorities to consider. Therefore, it is important to remember to always include your college president in any questions or requests that you make of college staff — even what you might think is a trivial request.

As we seek to become and continue to be effective trustees, how we ask questions is just as important as the questions we ask. Mastering this skill will lead to a more positive relationship with your board colleagues and with college leadership.

2. How is our college funded?

The second key question for new trustees to ask is, “how is our college funded?” Understanding the ins and out of your college budget will take some time, but gaining a basic understanding of the budget should be the first task of a new trustee.

There are many different funding sources for community colleges, and they vary widely from state to state. In California, community colleges are almost totally funded by the state, with very little local revenue. And our state's funding process is very complex, with formulas for both unrestricted and restricted revenues. As a new trustee, don't expect to understand these budget complexities after one or even a few briefings with your college president and chief financial officer. Ask questions related to fiscal policies and be patient, because it may take a few budget cycles for you to gain a full understanding of the entire budget process.

As you begin your work as a new trustee, try to understand the budget challenges faced by your institution. Remember that any budget challenges your college may face will need to be solved over time and with a team approach. By asking policy-oriented questions, you can be a team player who wants to contribute to positive solutions.

3. What is our data on student success measures?

Community college trustees are elected to their college boards to ensure that the educational needs of their community

are being met. To meet that responsibility, trustees must understand the student outcomes of their college. As a new trustee, it is particularly important to understand your college's student success data. Your initial briefing should give you an understanding of degree completion rates, transfer rates, course persistence, academic achievement, and other metrics of student success.

Knowing about student success data is important, but it is also important to know what programs are in place that are working to improve student success. Are there policies and programs that your college needs but has been unable to implement?

Understanding the student success data will help you as a new trustee begin to play a role in supporting your institution's efforts to implement student success programs that can increase key student success metrics.

4. What does our enrollment data show?

Enrollment management is critical for community colleges, which are often funded based on enrollment. The board of trustees plays an important role in enrollment management by overseeing their president's enrollment-management programs and monitoring enrollment data.

The importance of understanding enrollment and student data goes far beyond the budget implications. Trustees need to be aware of the diversity and profile of the students served by their institution. Knowing the demographic and economic profiles of the students you serve can help trustees better understand student needs and challenges.

Knowing the numbers of first-generation college students, immigrant students, and the racial and ethnic breakdowns of their students can help a trustee understand the need for various policies that can help students be successful. Knowing the estimated numbers of housing and food insecure students can help trustees promote policies to help students meet those needs.

Four Questions for Good Policy Making

In summary, these four questions will help a new trustee, and even experienced ones like me, become better policy makers. Trustees who understand the budget process, student success data, and student enrollment data will have the information they need to support their board in making effective policy decisions that will have a positive impact on students. Knowing how to ask the questions to get this information will help a new trustee become a team player and a trusted leader with their board and college leadership.



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