

# THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE: CHAPTER SIX

ZOOM FATIGUE AND POST-COVID CHALLENGES RAISE TENSIONS.

BY EDUARDO MARTI

PAM SCHIER WAS TIRED OF ZOOM MEETINGS. THE DECISION TO RESTORE in-person classes was a welcomed relief. Everything was almost normal again.

When a crisis is finally over, an assessment of the damage done usually takes place. As the chair of the human resources committee, Schier was concerned with the impact remote learning had on the quality of instruction delivered at Filmore Community College. She had tried to place herself in the faculty's shoes. She became convinced that, while the quality of the course content delivery could have been preserved, the role of the faculty member as a mentor and an advisor had been severely impacted by remote learning. This question weighed heavily on her mind because the completion rate at FCCC was low to begin with, and now it could be even lower. The human cost of the crisis could be even more significant.

Schier decided to speak to the chair of the board, Chuck Frazier,

and the president of the College, Al Pendleton. Following protocol, she called Frazier first.

"Good morning, Chuck," she said. "This is Pam Schier. How are you doing this lovely June morning?"

"I'm well, Pam," Frazier said, a bit irritated as she interrupted his morning exercise routine, which as a 78-year-old he followed religiously. "To what do I owe the honor of this call?"

"Well, I've been increasingly concerned about the impact that the COVID-19 crisis has had on our college," she said. "Not only have enrollments declined, but I'm sure that the graduation and retention rates will be affected. Luckily, the CARES Act and Coronavirus Response Relief Supplemental Appropriation Act have stabilized our finances, but we still must be concerned with the impact of the epidemic on our students. I think we need to formulate a plan to assess the damage and to help our faculty navigate through the lingering effects of the crisis."

Not quite convinced of the urgency of the matter but being respectful to a fellow trustee, Frazier responded, “Why don’t I call for a meeting with the president and we can discuss where we are and what are our next steps?”

“That would be great,” Schier said. They hung up, and she returned to her computer to prepare for yet another Zoom meeting about her insurance business. People had become accustomed to the convenience of working from home, and she needed to be sensitive to the needs of her employees as they could easily switch companies. So, as much as she hates Zoom meetings, she continued to hold her management team meeting in this venue.

The following morning, Schier received a phone call from President Pendleton’s office. The assistant called to inquire about her availability to attend a Zoom meeting with President Pendleton and Frazier at 2 p.m. Another consequence of technology is that meetings do not need much lead time, she thought to herself. “Sure, I can make myself available,” she said. “Thank you and please send me the link.”

The meeting was productive in that President Pendleton appeared to have taken into consideration the need to assess the impact of the crisis. He welcomed both Schier and Frazier and was happy to discuss the college’s reaction to the crisis and the plans for the fall semester. He indicated that a crisis intervention team composed of Robert Jones, vice president for academic affairs, Judith Marshall, also a vice president for academic affairs, and Steve Hoffman, director of institutional research, had been formed. He charged the team to determine how the crisis had affected student retention, to organize a Post-COVID Counseling Center (PCCC) and to reinforce the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning’s efforts to assist faculty re-entry into the “post-COVID work space.”

“Excellent,” said Frazier. “It is important that we inform the board at the next meeting about the administration’s plans.”

“I have a few questions, Al,” Schier interjected. “First, how firm are the plans? Was there any consultation with the college community, or is this already in place? While reporting to the full board of trustees makes sense, I think we should have a facilitated retreat to fine tune the recommendations of the staff.” Schier was a bit out of sorts due to the firmness of the plan without input from the main constituencies of the college. She told herself that this is one of those moments when the trustees must rein in the administration from getting too ahead of itself. After all, collegial governance is needed most during a crisis, she thought to herself.

“I thought you would be pleased with our initiative,” President Pendleton said. There was a prolonged silence. Finally, Frazier broke the ice.

“Look Al, we are not trying to micromanage the situation,” he said. “I don’t want to speak for you, Pam, but I think that you feel the need for greater transparency and consultation before the crisis management team begins to implement its charge.” Schier could

tell that he had interjected to defuse the tension. He continued, “We can dedicate a portion of our scheduled August retreat to receive a report as to how the college responded to the crisis. But I don’t want to delay the implementation of the administration’s plan until then. Can you live with that?”

Schier took a deep breath and responded. “I guess I can,” she said. “I just want to reiterate my disappointment about the way you went ahead and created the crisis management team without consultation with members of the board. The least you could have done was to discuss it with Frazier before proceeding.”

“I’m sorry you feel this way, Pam, but I thought that the management of the post-COVID situation was well within my prerogative as the president of the institution,” President Pendleton said. “I fully intended to inform the board at our next meeting. I did not inform Frazier or any other member of the board because of the need for expediency.”

After President Pendleton left the videoconference, Schier said to Frazier, “Don’t get me wrong, I am the CEO of my insurance firm and I know that in times of crisis, it’s natural for a leader to take charge. I still feel that Al jumped the gun on this one. It reminds me of Alexander Haig during the attempted assassination of President Reagan and how he insisted that he was in charge.”

## Questions for the Board:

1. Was Schier wrong to call for this meeting?
2. What could President Pendleton have done to assuage Schier’s concerns during the meeting? Should he have done anything prior to the meeting that could have prevented her frustrations?
3. Did the board chair handle the disagreement in the correct manner? What would you have wanted the board to do in this situation?
4. Was it appropriate for Schier to have disclosed her disappointment with President Pendleton, or would it have been better for her to keep her concerns to herself and follow the board chair’s lead?
5. Do you think Schier and Frazier’s frustrations with videoconferencing and being interrupted while working at home might have affected the dynamics of their conversations? What can college leaders do to encourage effective and congenial communications as these modes of communication continue into the new academic year?



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