

ANATOMY OF A QUESTION

THE QUESTIONS ASKED NOW BY TRUSTEES WILL LEAD TO THE ANSWERS FUTURE READY INSTITUTIONS NEED.

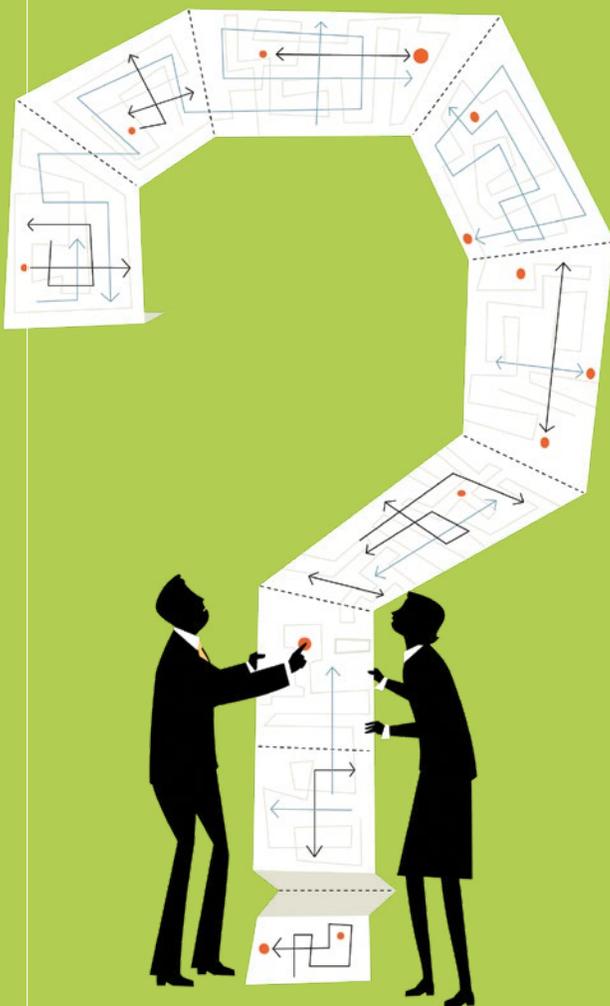
BY DAVID E. RUTLEDGE

QUESTIONS ARE THE KEYS THAT UNLOCK OUR IMAGINATION and drive creativity. The products, technology, and processes that allow for our comforts today were born out of questions raised in our yesterdays. Those we think of as “change agents” appear to be fearless about asking questions nobody else is thinking about. They develop the art of inquiry, and by doing so are leading where no one else has gone before. Think about the creators of Microsoft, Netflix, Facebook, social activists, teachers, and numerous others who asked a question that ignited a chain of events that changed the world.

I used to spend a lot of time with a friend (now deceased) who was an inventor. He also loved the game of golf. Thinking back, I remember that he was always tinkering with things. The second thing I remember is he was always asking questions framed as “Why,” “What if,” and “How.” During one of our times together, he was tinkering with a one-foot square piece of mirrored glass. It turns out, he had been wondering why golfers tend to be poor at putting. After exploring various scenarios, my friend, Ray Florian, created a lined mirrored training aid that golfers can lay on the ground in front of them during their practice sessions. The patented training aid allows users to see when they are directly over the ball and when the ball and putter are aligned with the hole. Royalties from this and his other golf training aid patents are still flowing to his family.

Warren Berger, author of *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*, recounts another situation where a simple question gave birth to the Polaroid Camera — amazing technology for its time. In the 1940s, Edwin Land snapped a picture of his three-year-old daughter using a regular camera. She asked to see the picture. Land explained that they had to wait for it to be sent off to be developed. Then she asked a seemingly naive question: “Why do we have to wait for the picture?” Over time, Land brought the darkroom into the camera. What began with a simple question resulted in the development of a camera that could produce pictures instantly.

Sometimes community college board rooms can become “dark rooms” when trustees fail to stimulate vigorous discussions by asking questions.



“KNOWLEDGE IS HAVING THE RIGHT ANSWER. INTELLIGENCE IS ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION.”

—ANONYMOUS

When patience is lost and questions aren't asked or debated, opportunities for game-changing policy directives or strategic initiatives can be lost.

Community college trustees have a tough job that carries enormous responsibilities. They are fiduciaries who hold their institutions in trust for the benefit of the public they serve. Their responsibilities include the duty of care, loyalty, and obedience to applicable laws. Within these parameters, they are also tasked with defining the mission, cultivating institutional values, and planning for the college's future. These awesome responsibilities are operationalized through a two-tier board governance structure; one tier informs and directs the administration through policies developed by the board; the second calls on the creative talent of the CEO to develop and implement tactics that carry out the board's policies. Board/CEO relationships thrive when this process is in place and respected.

One of the hallmarks of high-performing boards is how well trustees understand and protect the separation of their role as policymakers and the CEO's role of policy implementor. However, there is another important aspect of this relationship. Trustees must not be passive about asking probing questions of their CEO or each other. These are some questions I would be thinking about and asking continuously:

- Do we make it easy for students to see and navigate a clear path to reach their goal — graduation or otherwise?
- Do we have the right programs and activities in place to attract students and grow enrollment?
- What is our college known for? Is its identity clear?
- Do we focus as much time on retaining students as we do on attracting them?
- Do we demonstrate that diversity is a part of our college's DNA? How?
- Are we taking maximum advantage of our technology system by making sure that the college's resource management processes (RMP) are aligned with the right technology (an Enterprise Resource Platform, or ERP)?
- Do we prepare for the opportunities that the future may present, or seek to mitigate potential risks by having a living strategic plan in place?
- Do we emphasize forming strong mutually beneficial community and business collaborations?

Asking the right question can sometimes be critical to a good outcome. Perhaps this story will illustrate why.

A man walking through a park encountered a man sitting on a park bench with a dog lying nearby.

The man: “Does your dog bite?”

The bench sitter: “No.”

The man pets the dog, and the dog bites him.

The man: “I thought you said your dog doesn't bite!”

The bench sitter: “It doesn't. That's not my dog.”

In a board meeting setting, asking questions can promote high order thinking skills, stimulate other questions that may be critical to the discussion, and support information retention. In our dog example, perhaps the initial question should have been “is that your dog?”

Sometimes in a group setting like a board meeting, trustees may become reluctant to ask questions. This reluctance could result from a fear that our question will appear dumb or solicit information we should already know. This fear is manageable if we remind ourselves that we are lifelong learners. We learn by asking questions, and this is part of the journey. In his book *Beyond the Obvious*, Phil McKinney gives some examples of what can be gained from being fearless about asking questions:

1. **You can gain new insight.** A question may not relate to the current topic but may prove beneficial to you in some way in the future.
2. **You can reach a different conclusion.** New ideas can be realized by asking questions that are unrelated to the main topic.
3. **You can have your memory jogged.** You may remember someone else who had a similar issue and how they dealt with it.
4. **You can resolve issues.** If there is a disagreement, it could be helpful to understand where others are coming from before the issue can be resolved.

Our community colleges serve as a critically important, cost-effective entry into higher education for many. The quality academic offerings, nurturing faculty and staff, and the flexibility to adjust quickly to workforce needs must not be allowed to drift into mediocrity. The strength of community colleges lies in our ability to keep separate the rolls of trustee boards and administration, and the ability to prioritize strategic policies by asking probing questions. In a post-pandemic world, economic uncertainty will remain with us. However, the questions asked now by trustees will lead to answers that will inform our decision-making and get our colleges future ready so they don't merely survive — but thrive.



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