



Tested by  
**Crisis**

THE BOARD-PRESIDENT  
RELATIONSHIP WAS CHALLENGED  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC,  
BUT ULTIMATELY HELPED  
INSTITUTIONS PREVAIL.

BY BRADLEY J. EBERSOLE

THE BOARD-PRESIDENT RELATIONSHIP IN A COMMUNITY college is said to be the most critical in the organization. In the best of times, this relationship can be tested by varying interpretations of roles, divergent personalities, and personal relationships. So what can happen in the worst of times when a real crisis emerges? How are these roles actualized, and what are the tendencies and drivers for leaders on both sides of the table, people who are accustomed to being in charge and taking control?

The COVID-19 pandemic is defined in crisis management terms as a low-likelihood, high-impact circumstance which has caused a shock to every community college in the country. The resulting scrutiny and pressure can be overwhelming: Clear focus and swift fixes are demanded, effective communication is critical, and decisions continue to be made which significantly impact the future of the college.

Board and president roles are largely defined as having a line drawn between the policy governance and oversight responsibilities of the board and the president's administration of the institution. But differentiating this balance of powers can be an inexact science. With this in mind, I asked the presidents and board chairs of four relatively small rural community colleges to reflect on their experiences related to responding to the pandemic and to share how that has impacted their board and president roles and relationships.

When the pandemic erupted a year ago, the presidents at Pennsylvania Highlands Community College (Pa.), Atlantic Cape Community College (N.J.), Hawkeye Community College (Iowa), and Southern State Community College (Ohio) had been in their positions for tenures ranging from eight weeks to 12 years. Their respective board chairs had been serving for a significant time.

### Initial Reaction

The initial reactions of board chairs in the first days of the pandemic when closures were imminent ranged from "Oh, crap" to "Now what?" and "So what's the plan?" One chair felt the college had made good progress in recent years in the face of varying challenges and had a sinking feeling it would all be lost. Another acknowledged immediately that "we just had to get out of the way and let the president run the show." Another chair expressed some comfort that their Carver Policy Governance model would, if followed, provide the road map to getting them through the crisis.

Questions by the board directed to the president naturally did arise as board members felt responsibility for the well-being of the college. Primarily, the boards inquired about the safety of students, faculty, and staff. This seemed to be foremost in their minds as the boards' concerns prompted each president to make safety the highest priority in their action and planning.

The second-most-pressing thought expressed by most board chairs was related to finances. Concerns about the financial impact on their colleges was shared by both boards and presidents.

(Interestingly, a national survey of nearly 250 college and university presidents published by the American Council on Education in March determined similar results: the primary concerns of college CEOs in November 2020 and February 2021 were the mental health of students and faculty and staff, followed by long-term financial viability.)

### 'We Just Have to do This'

After collecting himself from the initial shocking pressure, one president recalled thinking "we just have to do this." Each leader described daily crisis management meetings, some seven days each week, and an increase in communication with the entire college.

The presidents and board chairs also mentioned an increase in communication with one another. As presidents took charge of the situation, they seemed to understand what the board needed to know and when they needed to know it. One president heavily relied on the 'no surprises' principle in determining communication practices.

Generally, each of these presidents had already established good relationships and communication patterns with their boards, and although these communications may have increased in tempo, they built upon an existing structure. The board chairs shared that they had confidence in their presidents, and it was the regular communication which cemented that trust and defined their role. Support of emergency expenditures and significant policy decisions related to personnel and instruction may have involved some leaps of faith, but that support was expressed as being crucial.

### Impact of Board Culture

Community college boards are for the most part characteristically similar. They have common responsibilities as they provide direction and oversight. However, each board has its own culture which impacts its respective level of engagement.

In the case of these four community colleges, reactions ranged from standing aside and watching carefully the actions of the president and administration to more active involvement. One board, for example, saw its role as fundraising for students and proudly shared the success it had in raising money for enhancing student success. This board also provided suggestions for the president on potential ways to control access to the campus and into buildings. The relationship between this president and board was such that this more engaged role was welcomed and served to benefit the institution and the students.

It is true that the culture of each college may be different, but the core of managing the crisis was the understanding of the importance of a trusting relationship between the president and the board. Having a sense of trust was emphasized repeatedly.

One president reflected, "Remember, these people [the board] were also very busy with their work and personal lives" as they dealt with larger pandemic issues. Although they were involved



Southern State Community College President Kevin Boys sets the example on campus.



A Southern State Community College student observes safety protocols during the pandemic.

in monitoring the response and reactions of the president and college, they had many other concerns to deal with. They expected the president to take control.

### Lessons Learned by Presidents and Boards

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the continuity of the board-president relationship. It provided presidents an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership abilities and tested boards' understanding of their role in governance. It was the already established relationship between the two that made it possible for some colleges to weather the challenges, but the newly appointed president had to prove himself very quickly. That board chair was pleased with the result.

Simpler things like Zoom meetings were noted as cultural changes that will impact the board in the future. However, despite recognizing the impending financial challenges and trends of declining enrollment, the interviewed presidents publicly expressed a sense of hope for the future, which is parlayed into the language expressed by the boards. Said one president, "People are psychologically frozen. They have lost their jobs and children are out of school. We want to be here when they start to thaw." The board chair of that college followed with "We are here for the community." This sense of hope for the future was further demonstrated as several of the presidents spoke of continuing with significant capital projects. "The community college is very relevant, flexible, and can pivot with change," said a board chair.

The roles of community college boards and presidents are universally similar, but not entirely the same. Those roles may be tested in crisis. Trust, regular communication, and unwavering belief in the mission of the community college allow the board

and president to continue to function within their roles for the benefit of students and the community.

Participating individuals included President Todd Holcomb and Board Chair Jay Nardini, Hawkeye Community College, Iowa; President Barbara Gaba and Board Chair Maria Mento, Atlantic Cape Community College, New Jersey; President Steve Nunez and Board Chair Greg Winger, Pennsylvania Highlands Community College; and President Kevin Boys and Board Chair Brian Prickett, Southern State Community College, Ohio.



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