

THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE: CHAPTER FIVE

TRUSTEE PAM SCHIER'S COMMITTEE DUTIES CHALLENGE HER LEADERSHIP DURING A FINANCIAL CRISIS.

BY EDUARDO MARTI

PAM SCHIER WAS SITTING AT HER KITCHEN TABLE WONDERING IF 2021 WAS going to be a better year. Her service as a trustee was almost always rewarding but, at times, taxing. This was one of these times. The COVID-19 crisis and the resulting economic situation had made guiding and supporting President Al Pendleton a more challenging task.

As the recently elected chair of the human resources committee, Schier will be receiving President Pendleton's recommendation on personnel reduction decisions as the college prepares for the spring semester. The state just announced a 5 percent reduction in the per-full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment allocation, and the college had experienced a 12 percent decline in fall-to-spring enrollment. As a result, the \$55 million that was originally budgeted for the spring semester is now only \$50 million. The reduction must come primarily from personnel cuts, as the discretionary funds available are only 2 percent of the budget. Moreover, the faculty union contract expired, and negotiations for the next contract must commence under less than ideal circumstances.

Pondering the situation facing her, Schier decided to call Board Chair Chuck Frazier and seek some direction.

"Hello, Chuck," she said. "This is Pam. I hope that you had a great holiday season and that you and your family are well. This issue with the COVID-19 virus is horrible, isn't it?" She liked to talk with Frazier. He was a good man who was wise about the workings of the college, and he was someone whom she could trust.

"Pam, it is so nice to hear from you," Frazier replied. "All these Zoom meetings feel so cold and distant. I was thinking about reaching out to all the members of the executive committee to discuss our predicament. Also, I have been in communication with Al Pendleton and asked him to formulate a plan to reduce the spring budget by \$5 million. He is to get back to me within a week."

"Chuck, as chair of the human resources committee, I believe that I am responsible for serving as a sounding board to President Pendleton regarding personnel cuts. I hope that we can make these cuts without having to declare retrenchment of full-time faculty. We need to work with the union to ensure that we keep morale at a reasonable level. Hopefully, as the vaccines are rolled out, our enrollment picture will improve," Schier said with sincere optimism. "We are about to go into negotiations for the new contract, and it would be good if we could extend the present contract until the fiscal situation improves." She paused, unable to gauge his reaction. "It is going to be delicate to convince the union, but I believe that if we are transparent and forthright with all the facts, they will understand. Frankly, this is one of those instances that make or break the trust among the stakeholders of the institution."

"Well, Pam," responded Frazier, "what exactly are you proposing? I am at a loss to provide clear guidance."

"I volunteer to assist Al Pendleton in any way that he wants. It's important that, in this time of crisis, we work in partnership with our president and provide him with a mechanism to bounce off ideas. What do you think?"

"Pam, I think that this is a good idea. Let me call Al and

let him know that you want to work with him during this difficult period."

President Pendleton reacted positively to the suggestion. However, he expressed some reservation about having a trustee directly involved in the formulation of a plan. He felt that Pam could be used in a better way by reacting to the proposals formulated by the administration.

He met with Pam in his office.

"Pam, I trust that you and yours had a good respite over the holidays," he said with a warm smile. "I appreciate your willingness to help and I welcome your suggestions. I do ask, however, that you let me handle the meetings and that I use you as a sounding board as we formulate the plan of action to meet the demands of the crisis."

"Here is what I propose," Pendleton continued. "First, we must keep the lines of communication open with the county, the administration, and the collective bargaining unit. Transparency is essential. You and I can meet with the county fiscal committee chair and explain our situation. Secondly," he added, "we need to preserve all the good will that we have developed over the last five years under my presidency. As I meet with the various campus constituencies, I will keep you informed so that I can forthrightly communicate to everyone that the board will support my recommendations. If we do this, we will get through the fiscal crisis and prevent a crisis of trust that could be created by actions seen as arbitrary and capricious."

Pendleton paused for a moment, then added, "Pam, I am so very glad that you are the chair of the human resources committee! Your experience leading a successful insurance business and your knowledge of human behavior is, in times such as this, invaluable. Thank you for your willingness to help."

"That is very nice of you to say, Al," Schier replied. "I agree that you, as our president, should conduct all the necessary meetings and I will make myself available to you any time, day or night, to discuss the progress you are making. I think that it is very important that we respect your authority as CEO and that we resist the tendency to micromanage in times such as this. As you know, I love this college and want to do whatever it takes to make this a positive experience for everyone involved and, in doing so, strengthen our college. I will await your calls and meet with you whenever you want."

Chair Frazier organized a meeting of the executive committee that included the chairs of all the committees and President Pendleton. At this meeting, Chair Frazier reiterated the need to support the president and welcomed his desire to preserve lines of communications to engender additional trust during this time. President Pendleton proceeded to lay out his plan of action. The president proposed that he would consult with the chair of the faculty senate, the president of

the student government, the president of the union chapter, and the chair of the county commissioners to formulate a plan that will address the necessary reductions in personnel. Upon formulation of the plan, the board would convene in special session to discuss the plan. Finally, upon approval, Chair Frazier and President Pendleton would release a joint statement to college community, the county commissioners, and the press.

As the meetings proceeded, a plan to institute the \$5 million reduction began to take form. Fundamental to the plan was the fact that all actions would be reviewed during the summer as the COVID vaccines most likely would alleviate the impact on enrollment. Even with the per-FTE reduction, the expected increase in enrollment could help reduce the deficit.

At the special meeting of the board, President Pendleton proceeded to present his plan:

“Mr. Chair, I hereby submit for your consideration a plan to respond to existing fiscal realities. It is my belief that, along with a freeze in non-essential expenditures, we will ensure the fiscal integrity of our institution during this crisis. However, I must note that every time we affect the lives of faculty and staff, it lessens the fabric of our community. It my hope that these actions are of a temporary nature. But we believe that this is the responsible reaction to a difficult fiscal situation. I am grateful that our board’s human resources committee helped in the formulation of this response. Also, I am pleased to report after consultation with fiscal affairs committee of the board, the faculty senate, the student government, and the county commissioners, there was no objection to our plan. Therefore, I recommend:

1. Reduction of \$1.5 million in the adjunct budget. This will have a significant impact on offerings for the spring, so we will be furloughing adjunct faculty. It is our hope that most of the adjunct faculty members can be rehired in the fall.
2. Freeze all planned hiring. This will have a temporary and significant impact on faculty offerings, staff, and administration but, again, we are hopeful that we can slowly reinstated the hiring plan during the following academic year. (\$100,000 reduction.)
3. Stop all contract work such as cafeteria services and landscape services and reduce security. (\$487,738 reduction.)
4. As facilities are not being utilized, lock down buildings and reduce heat and electric services. (\$200,000 reduction.)
5. Examine all staff and apply the last-in-first-out formula to furlough non-essential staff. (\$300,000 reduction.)
6. Stop all non-personnel (OTPS) expenditures unless deemed essential. (\$2.5 million reduction.)

“Mr. Chairman, we have formulated this crisis intervention plan with the input of the administration as well as the faculty.

We have informed the county commissioners and the union. We believe that there is understanding of the need to act in this manner and, therefore, I move acceptance of the plan as presented.”

The plan was approved by the board with two trustees dissenting.

As Schier drove home from the board meeting, she reflected on everything she had experienced during her tenure as a trustee: “Being a member of the board of trustees is an awesome responsibility. There are times that one must do what is good for the institution and one must distance oneself, as much as possible, from the emotional difficulties of the task,” she thought. “Chairing this board committee takes a lot of my time, and many times I feel resentful of this time it takes. But, given what I saw tonight, I understand that putting time into planning and strategy, developing relationships, and meeting with people results in a stronger board, a better relationship between the president and staff, and a stronger institution overall. This experience proves to me that the role of a trustee, while demanding, is valuable and my time was well spent. Now, the hard work begins, and we must support our president.”

Questions for Trustees

1. Do you think that Schier and Frazier’s involvement in formulating a plan was too intrusive? Did they engage in micromanagement? What would you do in their situation?
2. Should the board have directed President Pendleton to formulate the plan and then present it to the board? What do you think about the board and president partnering in this manner?
3. Consultation in times of crisis is always difficult, and sometimes it is best to have an action presented rather than provide time for dissent. Do you think that Schier and Frazier’s consultation process was appropriate?
4. How would your board have handled a similar situation? Is your college facing similar constraints?



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