

THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE: CHAPTER FOUR

NEW TRUSTEE PAM SCHIER PLAYS A KEY ROLE AS THE COLLEGE NAVIGATES CHALLENGES INVOLVING FREE SPEECH AND CAMPUS DISRUPTIONS.

BY EDUARDO MARTI

TRUST IS THE CURRENCY OF GOOD GOVERNANCE. IT IS NURTURED EVERY DAY THROUGH every action. In order to nurture trust among fellow trustees and between the board and the various communities served, there must be good channels of communication. So it is important that new and veteran trustees are very clear as to the procedures used by the board to resolve conflicts and find common ground to better the college. This is especially important during times of conflict. In the past three articles, we have seen Pam Schier grow in her role of trustee. She is now a valued member of the board, and her relationship with the chair and her fellow trustees is excellent. Based on this level of trust, Pam wanted to know how well prepared the college is to address the turbulence of our times.

Schier asked Chuck Frazier, the board's chair, how the college would handle campus disruptions. Other board members asked if the college has a prepared statement regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. Had the board made its position of support clear to the communities they serve? Members of the executive committee asked Frazier to charge the governance committee with reviewing existing policies governing free speech on campus and to ask President Pendleton for a carefully crafted document regarding the Black Lives Matter movement for board consideration.

After careful review, Jonas Martin, the chair of the governance committee, reported that while there was a policy regarding campus demonstrations, the committee found it to be too general. The existing policy simply stated that the college would protect free speech according to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. However, Martin added that this statement addresses only the freedoms of a teacher to conduct research and to make statements within the classroom walls.

At the next executive committee meeting, Chair Frazier reviewed the existing policy. He reminded the rest of the members that the role of the board is to set policy and that since the existing policy clearly states that the college will protect free speech on campus, that was sufficient. It is up to the college president, he reminded trustees, to institute procedures to ensure that the policy is carried out appropriately.

The chair asked President Pendleton for a report on how he was readying the campus for activities around issues affecting the nation. President Pendleton, realizing the delicacy of the request, engaged the faculty senate and administrative bodies to formulate a policy recommendation on how to address the issue of free speech on campus, freedom of assembly, and campus disruptions. The urgency of the request demanded prompt attention. President Pendleton requested a recommendation by no later than the end of the semester, but preferably sooner.

The chair of the faculty senate, professor Joseph Quincy, established a faculty committee of three individuals to work with the President's cabinet (Vice President for Academic Affairs Judith Marshall, Vice President for Student Affairs Robert Jones, and Vice President for Administration Mary Worth) and three student government senators. The charge of this ad hoc committee was to come up with a procedure to ensure freedom of expression at the campus with minimal disruption to the academic endeavor.

The ad hoc committee met twice per week, and after one month of deliberations it decided that the college should adopt a positive response to any demonstration sponsored by a campus organization. The only requirement was that the vice president for administration be informed prior to the activity. The office of the vice president for student affairs also was charged with assigning counselors to hold "open mic" sessions at the central quad. Students would be encouraged to express themselves for periods of 10 minutes each. Members of the student government would be asked to serve as timekeepers to assure that all who want to speak have an opportunity to do so. Whenever possible, the faculty would use the campus discussions as a teaching moment.

This procedure was rooted in the principle that mutual respect engenders trust among all parties and that, so long as a college

organization sponsors the activity, the campus community is bound to facilitate the discussion of the topic. It also was based on the idea that the trust engendered by the actions of the president and the board will help defuse emotional expressions of anger and frustration. President Pendleton and Quincy presented this proposal to the faculty senate.

The campus debate became intense. Some members of the faculty were adamant in their position that, as an academic institution, the college must be a safe haven for free speech and that anyone who wants to express a position, no matter how distasteful, must feel free to do so. Other members of the faculty were concerned that complete freedom of expression could be disruptive to the learning process and demanded that parameters be set for any demonstrations on campus. The state's legal department was consulted, and it was noncommittal, referring only to the body of law around the First Amendment.

At the end of the second month of deliberations, the faculty senate voted to reaffirm the proposal of the ad hoc committee. While some members of the faculty were not pleased, they were content in knowing that their voices and objections had been noted. This led them to trust that the ad hoc committee and the administration had no hidden agenda.

Concomitantly, the board passed a resolution indicating its support for the Black Lives Matter movement and encouraging the president and the entire academic community to institute a campus-wide series of discussions around the injustices of our country.

Questions for the Board

1. Do you think that the board acted in an appropriate manner? Why or why not?
2. Do you think the board would have passed the resolution if the new trustee, Pam Schier, had never asked how the college would handle board disruptions?
3. By involving the campus, did President Pendleton open a "can of worms" needlessly, or was he honoring his commitment to the community?
4. What if you are a board member who does not agree with this approach? How would you attempt to influence the decision? How would your fiduciary duties to the board, the college, and the community affect your actions?
5. Once a board makes a collective decision, all board members are obligated to support that decision. How can a dissenting board member reconcile their own beliefs while also honoring their commitment to support board decisions?



Eduardo Marti, Ph.D., is a trustee at Teachers College at Columbia University and former president of Queensborough Community College (CUNY), Corning Community College (SUNY), and Tompkins Cortland Community College (SUNY). He also authored a chapter of the forthcoming second edition of Trusteeship in Community

Colleges: A Guide for Effective Governance, available from ACCT in October.