

# THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE: CHAPTER THREE

BOARD CHAIR CHARLES FRAZIER EXPLAINS THE NUANCES OF BOARD SERVICE TO NEW TRUSTEE PAM SCHIER.

BY EDUARDO MARTI

*THIS ARTICLE IS THE THIRD IN A SERIES THAT WILL TAKE THE READER THROUGH THE eyes of a fictional community college trustee, Pam Schier, and her colleagues at the fictional Filmore County Community College. Informed by my own experiences and those of peers, the series will explore typical scenarios, including a new trustee's thoughts about experiences as they occur, and will conclude with questions for personal consideration and board discussion. The series is intended to inspire mindfulness among board members, new and experienced, about the full life cycle of trusteeship, from onboarding through transitioning off the board. All scenarios and characters are fictitious, though inspired by real-life experiences.*

Chuck Frazier has been chair of the board of trustees of Fillmore County Community College for nearly 10 years. He followed the founding chair, who served 28 years until his health forced him to resign. Frazier has been a member of the board of trustees for 15 years and has enjoyed seeing the college grow. He owns a number of McDonald's franchises in the county and holds a degree in industrial psychology from the University of Michigan. His employees are generally happy, as he pays great attention to their advancement and provides assistance to those who are interested in higher education.

As he was chair when President Al Pendleton was hired, Frazier feels invested in his success. To ensure clear lines of communications, he meets with him every Monday morning for coffee. At these meetings, they discuss matters affecting how the president is doing in advancing the key performance indicators (KPIs) agreed to at the last board retreat. Also, he serves as a sounding board for the president. During the last meeting, Frazier and Pendleton discussed the new trustee, Pam Schier.

"Chuck, Pam Schier needs to feel part of the team," Pendleton told Frazier. "I sense that she was not happy with our orientation. It's not that we want to stifle her enthusiasm, but an uninformed trustee can be disruptive. Would you speak with her?"

"Oh, don't worry about Pam, Al," said Frazier. "From all that I hear, she is a good person who cares deeply about our community. I have confidence in her ability and want to give her the necessary tools to help us in advancing the college's agenda. I'm sure that she will make a good trustee. I will reach out to her."

"Well, we'd better do this before the union or the faculty tries to influence her thinking," Pendleton responded. "As we are entering negotiations, the last thing we need is someone who doesn't understand the process. Coming from the private sector, she might not understand the nuances of negotiations in this sector. Also, we're currently formulating our budget proposal to the county. We don't want to disrupt either event."

"If it makes you feel better, I will set up a meeting next week and discuss it with her," Frazier said.

Despite all of Frazier's experiences at the college, every time a new trustee is appointed to the board, he must find a way to engender their trust and explain the parameters of board members' prerogatives. This is no easy task. It can be misconstrued by a new trustee as the chair trying to minimize any dissent when what he really is trying to do is to ensure that disagreements among board members take place in an

orderly manner that does not affect the institution by airing them out in a public meeting.

Shortly after his breakfast with the president, Frazier went to his office and placed a call to the new trustee, Pam Schier. As he placed the call, he pondered how to approach her. He wanted to help her without appearing manipulative.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, Pam. Is this a good time to talk?"

"Yes, I was just getting ready to go to my office. The kids just left for school. I have a few minutes."

"Great. Well, I wanted to speak with you because I felt that our first meeting at Dr. Pendleton's office was not as effective as I would have wanted it to be. Also, it appears to me that you were thrust into a meeting of the board of trustees with little preparation. I want to see how I can facilitate your understanding of the college and the board's priorities and how we can use your considerable talents to help the college."

Well, well, this is a surprise, Schier thought. After the meeting, she never would have anticipated this conversation. [Editor's note: See the Fall 2019 issue of *Trustee Quarterly* for chapters one and two.]

"I would like to set up a meeting with you to discuss these matters at length. When do you think you would be available to have a thorough discussion with me?"

"Well, let's see...how about next Wednesday afternoon. Does that work for you?"

"Perfect, I will meet you at the college's board room at 2 p.m."

Frazier was glad that Schier agreed to meet. He was at the board room when she arrived.

"I am so glad you could make it," he said, greeting her with a warm smile. "This meeting is very important to me and to the rest of the board of trustees."

"Glad to be here," Schier said.

"As you know, my role as chair is to run effective meetings and maintain parliamentary procedure. That's why I prefer to have in-depth discussions of the topics at hand at the committee level and just bring reports and resolutions to the board meetings."

"Sorry to interrupt," Schier said, "but this is one aspect that I don't feel comfortable with. Are you saying that I can't speak my mind at the board meetings?"

"No," he said, "No. What I am asking is that...we all have to be aware that whatever we say at the board meetings is public information. So, sensitive matters should be discussed at the committee level, where there is more of a chance to resolve any conflict without negative repercussions."

"OK. But please be assured that I will speak my mind when I think it is necessary."

"That is your prerogative, Pam," said Frazier.

"Chuck, why is it that I get the feeling that, in your mind's eye, the perfect board meeting is quick, with all the resolutions and reports unanimously accepted? Are you looking for a 'rubber stamp' board?"

"No, Pam," Frazier said. "Not at all. That is not the point. The point is that we are a group of people trying to coordinate our efforts for the good of the college. So, it's best to use the committee system to air out our differences and come to the full board meetings prepared. But, of course if you or any other board member objects to what the committee proposes, then, by all means, speak your mind."

"What if I have a conflict with other board members? What procedure should I use?"

"As chair, I am responsible for ensuring that all opinions are heard. When two or more board members disagree vehemently, I meet with them, hear them out but, in the end, I must rule. I want to ensure that disagreements do not overflow to the personal animosity arena. I don't always succeed, but I try."

"That is fair. On another matter, I heard that it's frowned upon for a trustee to roam the college asking for information. Is that true?"

"As a trustee, you should feel free to go to the college whenever you want. However, you should be aware that while you have a great deal of influence, as an individual trustee, you have no authority. That authority rests on the board as an entity; this entity exists only when the board is in session. Also, you should be aware that persons of the many constituencies we serve will try to enlist your support for items being considered by the board and that sometimes these actions are truly not in the best interest of the college."

"Oh, Chuck, what do you take me for? I'm not naïve. I know when someone is trying to take advantage of me."

"No, Pam, you misunderstand me. I'm well aware of your experience and reputation," Frazier said. "I just also know based on my experience on this particular board that you cannot be aware of the intricacies of our college's governance from a distance. Until you are well versed in our operating procedures, you may want to be careful. That is all that I am saying."

"As chair," he continued, "I make sure that all members of the board of trustees feel comfortable and that their voices are heard. As you know, many board members are powerful individuals used to having their way. Fortunately, most board members are experienced in either not-for-profit or for-profit boards. Therefore, they are familiar with how boards operate. Like most boards, we focus on the fiscal and

human resources used by the college to meet stated goals. However, community colleges by nature are different than private businesses in that we serve various constituencies, each with its own level of authority. To advance our agenda, we must engage in consultation and seek collaboration with various influential groups. These constituencies are the students, the community at-large, the elected officials, donors, and the businesses served by the college. Also, our faculty is unionized, so all conditions of employment agreed upon must be adhered to. In addition, the faculty governance bodies have an important role in managing the curriculum. The authority of the board is restricted by the principles of academic freedom, and we must ensure that intellectual debate ensues at all levels at the college without fear of censorship or retaliation. While it appears that our authority is restricted by numerous factors, let me assure you that, as a board, we have a great deal of authority on matters affecting our college. A helpful analogy is to think of our board as a town government rather than as a private corporation."

"How about issues of sexual harassment? Racial equity? Free speech?"

"These are perfect examples of the delicacy with which we exercise our authority," Frazier answered. "Our first responsibility is to keep a safe and open environment for our students. This entails our board members being ever vigilant of anything that can jeopardize the safety and well-being of our students or staff members. For more dicey situations, we rely on our legal counsel for advice. But we are ultimately responsible and, thus, we must adjudicate as best we can within the legal parameters."

"This is very helpful, Chuck," Schier said. "So, to summarize, what you are saying to me is that my first order of business is to learn how we have done things in the past and when I see opportunities to improve, I should discuss suggestions with the appropriate committee. Once discussed and agreed upon, we then send them to the full board for approval. And once the board has voted, the suggestions become the 'law of the land.' Am I reading your message correctly?"

"Perfectly, yes," he said. "That's it. Look," Frazier said, "our work is difficult, and trusting one another is important. I think the best way to engender such trust is to have clear channels of communication. Don't you think? But we know blind trust is not healthy. We must make sure that we question each other and that we question all actions taken by the college to make sure that we operate in an ethical manner. In addition to being supportive of our president, we must carefully monitor how he accomplishes what he said

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we would do. As a body, we are ultimately responsible for all actions. Finally — but not least! — the most important task of a board of trustees is that of hiring a president, monitoring their performance, and dismissing them if we are not satisfied with the performance.”

“All right,” Schier said, “I understand. This is...a lot of information, but I get the delicacy and intricacy of the position.”

“I hope that this chat has been helpful to you. We didn't cover everything,” Frazier admitted, “but the reality is that learning the ins and outs of our roles here takes time. In time, serving on the board will become second nature. Please call me anytime, day or night, if you have additional questions or concerns about what is happening at the college.”

“Chuck, you can rest assured that I will. I want to be a productive trustee and advance the strategic objectives that the board has agreed to. I really appreciate this time we have spent together, and I feel much better about our relationship. Frankly, at first I thought that you were trying to sway me in a manner that felt patronizing, but it seems that we've turned a page.”

“Thank you, Pam. That was never my intention at all; it's just my responsibility as chair to properly orient any new board member and clarify roles, responsibilities, and limitations so that we don't start off on the wrong foot. The truth is, I'm excited to work with you because I know how much energy and insight you're going to bring to our board. And your questions show that you're already invested in

what we do. That's what makes a great trustee. I look forward to many years of fruitful cooperation.”

By the time the next new trustee met Schier, she was chair of the human resources committee and eventually would become a member of the board's executive committee. But these advances only happened over time, as Pam, like all trustees, still had a lot to learn.

**Questions for the board:**

- What is the role the chair in maintaining parliamentary procedure?
- Should the chair delegate conflict resolution among the staff?
- What is the role of the chair in ensuring that the college operates in an atmosphere where academics thrive and are celebrated?
- Describe the role of the chair vis-à-vis the president.
- Is there any ideal way by which a chair should orient a new board member?



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