

THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE: CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIENTATION EXPERIENCE IS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF FICTITIOUS TRUSTEE PAM SCHIER.

BY EDUARDO MARTI

DURING MY TENURE AS A COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT, I OFTEN WONDERED HOW TO best serve the board of trustees. Presently, I serve as a trustee of Teachers College at Columbia University, which has given me insights into higher education boards from both sides now — as a board member; and as the chief executive who reports to the board.

This article is the first of a series that will take the reader through the eyes of a fictional community college trustee, Pam Schier. 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.

Chapter One: Orientation

It all started with a phone call. Pam Schier received a call from the Fillmore County executive to determine if she was willing to place her name in nomination for the board of trustees of Fillmore County Community College. She was intrigued.

“What is my commitment?” she asked.

“The appointments are for seven years. The board meets once per month except in the summer. The meetings are usually two to four hours long. You will be asked to serve on one or two committees. The committees meet prior to the full board meeting. Here is where the real work is conducted. Technically, all meetings are open to the public and the press, but the only ones where the press is usually present is the full board meeting,” the county executive replied.

“Is this a political appointment?” Pam inquired. “You know that I abhor politics.”

“Well, you would be one of five trustees appointed by the county legislature, and you would serve with four others appointed by the governor. One student trustee is elected on an annual basis. In a sense, this a political appointment; however, as a trustee, you would owe allegiance to the institution. You will have been entrusted by the public through its representatives to act in the best interest of the college. So, generally, politics are left at the door.”

“What would my duties be?” continued Pam.

“You must regularly attend and participate in board meetings and committee meetings. You’ll need to read, review, and inquire about materials that involve the institution, especially board minutes, annual reports, other reports, plans, policies, and any literature that involves the institution. You have a fiduciary responsibility for the assets, finances, and investments of the college. And you and your fellow trustees formulate all the policies governing the institution.” answered the county executive. “I know that this sounds pretty ominous, but really, Pam, all this means is that you will represent your fellow county residents in ensuring that the college functions well and to the benefit of the community.”

“Yes, it does sound weighty. Let me think about it and I will get back to you,” Pam said as she bid goodbye to her old friend.

After some thought and discussion with her family, Pam decided to place her name in nomination. Her husband was supportive, and she was excited about being able to make a major contribution to the well-being of her community. Her nomination sailed through the county legislature, and she was appointed as a trustee right before the board’s June meeting.

The Orientation

Shortly after her appointment, Pam received a phone call from the president of the college. Pam was looking forward to having a conversation about what was expected of her.

“Hello, Ms. Schier, this is Dr. Albert Pendleton, the president

of Fillmore County Community College. I wonder if you have few minutes to talk?”

“Of course, Dr. Pendleton. I am very excited about serving as trustee and I have a thousand questions to ask you.”

“Great. First of all, allow me to express my congratulations on your appointment. I would like to invite you to come to campus and meet the chair of our board, Chuck Frasier, and some of the members of the staff. How does next Monday at 10 a.m. sound to you?”

“That will be great. I will be there.”

Pam’s first impression was not very positive. Dr. Pendleton seemed more interested in securing her attendance at this meeting than answering her questions.

That Monday morning, while walking from the parking lot to the office of the president, Pam observed the campus. Funny, she had been there many times before, but today she saw the half-full trash bins and the cracks on the sidewalk. She was now a stakeholder.

She arrived at the president’s office and was immediately struck by its relatively luxurious accommodations, as compared with the rest of the campus. As she sat down, coffee was brought to her by Dr. Pendleton’s assistant along with a thick binder labeled “Trustee Orientation Materials.” How in the world was she going to be able to digest all of this before the first meeting?

After some small talk, President Pendleton began by giving Pam a description of the college. “The college was founded in 1969 and serves about 4,000 full-time-equivalent students with 230 full-time faculty members and 500 adjuncts. The total population of the college is about 12,000 students. The college provides a pleasant suburban campus setting, with 10 buildings on 273 acres. About 1,500 students graduate every year. These are Fillmore County’s first responders, accountants/bookkeepers, teachers, and business people in this community of 500,000 residents.”

Chuck Frasier picked up the conversation, which seemed to Pam as if had been rehearsed. “We are a very friendly bunch here, Pam. May I call you Pam?” said Chair Frasier. “You can call me Chuck. Everyone does. We are pleased with your appointment. You see, the truth of the matter is that we need you to help Dr. Pendleton and me take this fine college to the next level. In the folder we gave you, you will find all the information you need. The most important fact for you to understand is that full board meetings are open, and whatever we say is scrutinized by the public, the faculty, and staff unions. Therefore, we must present a unified front. The place to have frank discussions is at the committee level. By the way, we are thinking of asking you to join the human resources committee. Would you give that some thought?”

Pam was told by the chair that the budget was tight because enrollments were declining and the county was not willing to provide additional assistance. The collective bargaining

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units were in the middle of negotiations and there was some dissatisfaction among the workers. The faculty union was very active in litigation, with 22 pending grievances. To top it all off, because state contributions were contingent upon FTE-driven enrollment and enrollment was declining, this revenue stream was declining as well. Pam was trying to remember if anyone had told her what FTE means.

She left the meeting feeling that she had been talked at. Her first impression was that she had joined a college with serious difficulties and with leadership that needed people who agreed with them rather than someone who would contribute new ideas and assist the board in making meaningful policy. Perhaps the administration was so stressed that there was no time for niceties. She was willing to give them a chance.

At lunch, she met with members of the administration's senior staff. They proceeded to tell her how wonderful the school is and how, in spite of poor funding, there were amazing things being done by dedicated faculty and the staff members. Student retention was something everyone was concerned about, but compared to other community colleges in the state, FCCC was not doing too badly, she was told. A long and exhausting tour of the campus followed the lunch. Pam went home with her head spinning. Her first impression was that the chair wanted smooth public meetings, the president and his staff were under great pressure, and that there was a potential toxic environment that leads to many grievances. She needed to learn more about the innerworkings of the college in order to contribute.

The day was the extent of her orientation. Pam, as the owner of a small insurance company that employs 15 people, would never think about onboarding an employee with such a flimsy orientation.

Questions for Thought & Discussion

1. How would you rate Pam's orientation on a scale of one (poorest) to 10 (best)?
2. Who is responsible for orienting new trustees? The president? The chair? Other trustees?

3. Were Pam's duties and responsibilities explained realistically by the board chair and president?
4. Does Pam have enough information to go on in order to make a sound decision about whether to participate?
5. What, if anything, was left out?
6. How many questions should Pam begin with? What sorts of questions should the president and board chair anticipate? How can they guide Pam in tempering her ambitions and excitement while also satisfying her curiosity?
7. How might the college president have made a better first impression on his newest trustee?
8. If you were the board chair, what would you have done to improve the process?
9. What are the longer-term implications of Pam's first impression?
10. What are the pros and cons of the ways by which Pam was welcomed by the board chair and the college president?
11. How does this compare with the way by which your college welcomes and acclimates new board members?
12. Did Pam receive too much, too little, or the right amount of information during her first meeting?
13. Could similar information be delivered to her in a less alarming way?
14. How could the college president and board chair have prepared her for this experience?

The next article in the series will follow Pam to her first committee and board meetings. Visit www.acct.org for more information for new trustees.



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