

# THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE: CHAPTER TWO

FICTIONAL TRUSTEE PAM SCHIER ATTENDS HER FIRST COMMITTEE AND BOARD MEETINGS — AND COMES AWAY WITH MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS.

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 second 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 for 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 2: The First Committee and Board Meetings

### THE COMMITTEE

Recently appointed to the Fillmore Community College Board of Trustees, Pam Schier had met with the board chair and the college president. From Pam's perspective, the two leaders gave her a crash course of some board meeting dos and don'ts, some troubling information about the college, and after receiving some contradictory and more positive information about the college from staff, she was left bewildered about her orientation process.

Nevertheless, Pam looked forward to her first meeting as part of the human resources committee. The committee was composed of two other trustees and the assistant dean for human resources, Margorie Cunningham. During the meeting, a staffing comparison report was presented. It showed that 35 percent of the instruction was delivered by adjunct professors, compared to the state average of 45 percent. The chair of the committee, Bud Johnson, requested that additional information be presented at the next committee meeting before a presentation to the full board. A report on a 25-question online sexual harassment test administered to all college employees was discussed. Eighty-five percent of the faculty and staff had taken it. The rest did not and were required to attend a two-hour workshop on the topic. The assistant dean reported that a grievance was filed by the faculty union, arguing that the faculty members who attended the workshops must be paid as this is beyond the scope of work defined in the contract. She noted that there was no report on the progress of the other 22 grievances filed by the union. Johnson, the committee chair, called for an executive session.

Assistant dean Cunningham reported on the collective bargaining negotiations and the demands of the faculty union. She reported that the union is asking for a 10 percent increase in salary spread over three years (2 percent the first year, 3 percent the second year, and 5 percent the last year). The college is offering a 5 percent package (1 percent the first year, 2 percent the second year, and 2 percent the last year). The negotiations were tense but not to the point of impasse, Cunningham said. The college had acquired the services of outside legal counsel, who is leading a negotiating team composed of the VP for administration, Roger McNamara, and Cunningham on behalf of the college.

Pam wondered to what extent she should become involved in the process. She asked how to respond to press inquiries and questions by outside constituents while the negotiations are in progress. The assistant dean for human resources insisted that only the legal counsel should address inquiries. Pam left the meeting feeling uncomfortable with the legal responsibility bestowed upon her without the training to address it. She had zero experience in collective bargaining. Thankfully, her husband was a lawyer, she thought.

### THE FIRST BOARD MEETING

At her first full board meeting, getting to know the other trustees was Pam's first order of business. She looked around the room. There were six white males, an African American gentleman, a Hispanic woman, and a student in her thirties. She tried to figure out how to find the "functional circles of power" in this group. She decided that after the meeting, she would invite each trustee individually to lunch. In this relaxed setting, she would find out the issues that drive the board and those that are left to the administration.

The board members seemed earnest and engaged. After the niceties of a friendly welcome, the meeting was called to order by Chuck Frasier, the board chair. The gallery was full of guests and reporters from the local newspapers. The minutes were approved, and the committee reports followed. Finance was the first. A number of resolutions for contracts and equipment purchases were passed unanimously. Pam's first vote as a trustee was done without one iota of knowledge of what she was voting on. She didn't feel that abstaining would send a good message at a public meeting. The human resources committee report was next. Academic affairs followed. The release of funds to hire adjuncts for the first summer session was approved. Two new full-time faculty members were introduced to the board of trustees. Vice President Donna Steed gave a presentation on the college's attempt to increase the NCLEX passing rates for nurses. Steed reported that the passing rate of the nursing graduates in the class of 2018 was 77 percent. The college's goal was to place in the high nineties. Steed said she was hopeful that the next class would do better. Many questions were directed at her about the effectiveness of hiring tutors and creating a practice lab for student nurses to prepare themselves for the next exam. Pam felt that the questions had been staged for the benefit of those present at the meeting. Finally, there was a report from the vice president of student affairs, Jack Jones, on the off-campus activities enjoyed by the students. He asked for assistance in the form of more counselors. A report on an "active shooter" drill was made as well. The board then called for an executive session to discuss personnel matters, with no action to be taken at the end. The public meeting was adjourned.

As Pam drove home, she pondered the dynamics of the board meeting. Efficiency seemed to be the order of the day. Was the chair too concerned with keeping to the agenda? Did he stifle discussion? Was the meeting a show for the public rather than a thoughtful discussion?

Her thoughts then shifted to the board materials she had been given. How in the world was she going to read all of it? The materials were written in English but, for all intents and purposes, could have been written in Chinese. The academic language, with all its acronyms, was difficult to master in one meeting.

As she arrived home, Pam's lingering questions revolved around effective trusteeship, fiduciary responsibilities, how to propose or analyze proposed policies, the board/CEO relationship and

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the role of individual trustees in nurturing the relationship, the role of the chair, how to improve diversity and equity, how to evaluate the performance of the president, how the board can evaluate its own performance to improve how it functions, how to assess student success, and accreditation. She had heard about accrediting bodies but does not know how the board is involved.

Pam had heard about the Policy Governance model in another setting and wondered if it would be useful. She Googled it and found that the model separates issues of organizational purpose (ends) from all other organizational issues (means), placing primary importance on those ends. Policy Governance boards demand accomplishment of purpose, and only limit the staff's available means to those which do not violate the board's pre-stated standards of prudence and ethics. Pam decided to investigate how the model could be used by the FCC board.

Many boards and college CEOs assume that a new trustee comes well informed, or they invest little or sometimes even no effort to acquaint new trustees with the knowledge they need to serve on a community college board. Even the most experienced board members who have served on other non-profit and for-profit boards need to familiarize themselves with the nuances of the college and, just as importantly, with how that particular board operates.

The public nature of a community college trustee, whose actions are carefully scrutinized by students, faculty, staff members, politicians, and the public at large, makes functioning in an effective manner a difficult task. The chair needs to influence the college and fellow trustees to provide the new member all the necessary tools for a successful tenure. The president needs to be very clear with the new trustee about the delicate pressure points at the college, the consequences of action and inaction, the laws that govern the college, and the collective bargaining agreements. But the president also must understand that the new trustee is part of a group of stakeholders who was hired to carry out the policies established by the board. Boards should be provided with good information pertinent to the institution, and not in a

selective manner for the intention of advancing an administrative agenda by limiting important considerations that may not support that agenda. The board's agenda belongs to the board of trustees. The fellow trustees need to work cooperatively with this new colleague and try hard not to influence her thinking while providing all the information that she needs.

### Questions for Thought & Discussion

1. What could Pam's board and president have done to prepare her for her first committee and board meetings?
2. Can you relate to Pam's first experience with her committee? How does the onboarding of new trustees and new committee members compare at your college? What three changes to your process might improve new members' first impressions and abilities to contribute in a meaningful way?
3. Should Pam have voted during the board meeting? How could the board chair and president have better prepared her for this vote at her first meeting?
4. How does your board determine the right amount of institutional information to present to new board members?
5. Regardless of how much and what information is relayed to new board members, how can new board members be onboarded in such a way that they don't feel alienated and overwhelmed by board discussions?
6. Pam wants to introduce a specific governance model to her new board. What are the most appropriate ways for her to do this, and what are the appropriate ways for the board to address her recommendations?

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