

Trust During a Time of Crisis

BACKED BY THEIR BOARDS, PRESIDENTS IMPLEMENT EMERGENCY PLANS.

By Norma Goldstein



ACROSS THE NATION, BOARDS OF TRUSTEES HAVE approved college emergency plans of action, including whole and partial campus closures, extending spring vacations, transitioning to online course delivery, suspending events and operations, and more. They have trusted their administrations and supported college presidents' efforts to implement these plans.

Trust is the real glue in the relationship between a board of trustees and a college president. In times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, boards need to support the CEO and the administrative team to get their jobs done quickly and effectively. During this pandemic, most community college boards across the nation have learned to trust their college leaders to do what the board expects: protect people and focus on helping students succeed in these stressful times. Frequently, this involves board members approving emergency plans and then allowing presidents and their administrators to rapidly implement them.

Boards hire the district chancellor or the college president. Some consider hiring the CEO a board's most important role, but board responsibility does not end there. According to ACCT's standards of good practice, boards should support their president and allow him or her to do their job, particularly when swift action is needed during an unprecedented crisis. What follow are examples of boards which have done just that in recent weeks as COVID-19 impacted institutions across the nation.

Empowering the CEO

Trust is an essential component in empowering the president or CEO to respond effectively during challenging times.

"Trust is important at a time like this," says Bernie Rhinerson, a longtime trustee for the San Diego Community College District (SDCCD). "This board and CEO have worked together for over a decade, and we have a very high level of trust with our CEO. It was important for the board to give the CEO the flexibility to act in a time of crisis."

To provide this flexibility, the SDCCD declared emergency conditions and its board passed a resolution that empowers the district's chancellor, Dr. Constance Carroll, to take action. "It is imperative that the Chancellor have the tools necessary to ensure the health and safety of students and staff on campuses and other district facilities [and] to ensure that student learning continues if student education needs to be conducted from alternate locations or virtual learning environments," the resolution states.

The resolution further resolves that "the Board of Trustees authorizes the Chancellor and /or her designee to take any and all actions necessary to ensure the continuation of public education, and the health and safety of the students and staff at the District sites." It was signed March 12, 2020.

Ratifying a Task Force Plan of Action

At the five Alamo Colleges in San Antonio, Texas, Chancellor Mike Flores set up a task force to limit the impact of the pandemic on the college and students by developing a plan of action.

The board rescheduled its regular meeting "to allow the chancellor time to implement the plan of action. He had to hustle to get it done, and we gave him that space," says Roberto Zárate, a former chair of the ACCT Board of Directors and a current member of the AACCC Board. "The board reviewed and ratified the emergency plan and then got out of his way."

Authorizing Board Chairs to Approve Presidential Decisions

"With things moving so fast, sometimes changing daily or even hourly with this pandemic, it has been critical to act quickly," says Dr. Kathleen Hetherington, president of Howard Community College in Maryland. "I feel the full support of the board in making decisions."

Hetherington indicated that the board hears from her routinely and that their college had to deal with many critical financial issues relating to the virus that required timely resolution. The board conducted a Zoom open meeting March 18th during which all board members attended, as did many others since the meeting was open to the public. The board authorized the board chair to approve Hetherington's actions on behalf of the full board for a limited amount of time. At its next meeting, the board plans to extend that decision until the state of emergency is over.

The board also gave the president authorization to maintain continuity of operations with faculty, staff, and students according to current state and federal safety and health best practices. "Having trust, the board had the confidence we'd do things right to help students finish the spring semester," Hetherington says. "Having that support from the board, plus state guidance, influenced what we do at the college."

Emergency Policies

Most high-performing boards have longstanding policies regarding emergency procedures which delegate authority to the president to act in times of duress. However, few could have expected the extent of college closures and rapid transition to remote learning that has occurred with COVID-19. Because each crisis brings its own set of critical circumstances, boards cannot assume that a college's emergency plan will cover every potential crisis.

Some boards have general policies for all emergencies, and some developed specific policies related to infectious diseases. In early March, the board at the Community College of Morris (CCM) in New Jersey reviewed and approved detailed infectious disease control policies for both CCM students and employees which outlined safety precautions for the college. The policy states:

In the event of an infectious disease outbreak, this policy and related procedures replaces and supersedes any other college policies and procedures on the following topics. It is understood that the policies herein are subject to change upon directives from State and Federal agencies.

The policy allows for changes per state and federal authorities, built-in flexibility that allows the president to make modifications as needed during an uncertain crisis. The administration continued to manage to meet its own responsibilities, and the board was available if and when policies needed attention.

The board at Clark State Community College in Ohio recently reviewed its interruption of college operations policy, which clearly authorizes the college president “to interrupt all or a specific part of the College’s operations...if it is in his/her judgment the health, safety, or well-being of employees and/or students is jeopardized.” Additionally, the policy states that “The President will determine when an emergency is declared.” Such broad authorization is based on the board’s trust of college leadership.

A Team Approach with the President, Board, and Board Attorney

In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the college administration will need to act quickly to meet rapidly changing state and federal directives. Trustees should work with the president and the college’s legal counsel to determine if the college’s existing policies provide the flexibility needed by the president to respond effectively. If they do not, the board should consult with legal counsel on whether maintaining compliance with institutional bylaws and state law requires developing emergency policies to provide the authority to the president to protect the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff during the emergency.

Authorizing the President to Act

Most presidents are well aware of how important good communications are between a CEO and board members — and particularly the board chair who often serves as the conduit between the two. Wise presidents make sure that the board is apprised of the college’s plan of action in the face of any emergency. Yet how does it work when each emergency is different? Here’s where trust comes in.

Boards approve college’s emergency plans, and certainly they should review their emergency policies on a regular basis to assure that quick action can be taken by a college president.

Through good communication, wise CEOs inform boards of intended implementation steps and ask for input and approval in some cases. However, when immediate action must be taken, as was the case for many in this pandemic, CEOs need to feel confident that the board has their support. According to CCM board chair Thomas Pele, “the board is very comfortable with allowing the administration to handle all necessary procedures

because the president keeps the board fully informed on a daily basis.”

Supporting Swift Decisions

According to Dr. Robert Martin, president of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he and his board of trustees had to move quickly to develop, approve, and implement the college’s emergency response plan to protect students and staff to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. “This COVID-19 disease is so challenging that we have had to make swift decisions to protect our students from harm,” Martin says. “The board has given me their support.”

Dr. Pearl Bower, President of Iḷisaḡvik College in Barrow, Alaska, says her board gave her free reign to act. After the state issued mandates to close government agencies and basically the whole state, “I had taken the bull by the horns to close the college campus down as soon as possible,” Bower says. “We had to think of our students and our employees.”

“I kept the board in the loop with my plan of action and had their support,” Bower adds. “When I need the board, they are there for me, but the board also knows that when I need to make a decision for the good of our entire campus, that I need to have authority to make those calls. This is why we are hired as executive administrators, presidents, CEOs — to make tough decisions. Boards need to put their trust in us and remember why we were hired.”

Teamwork in a Policy Governance Model

“We truly work as a team with our Policy Governance model,” says Dorey Diab, president of North Central State College in Ohio. “The board has been really supportive of me to enable the college to be responsive to the needs of the state, the college, and the community,” including the rapid switch to online operations during the pandemic and rolling out a Quality Matters process and training for faculty. “We are also protecting as many jobs as possible,” Diab says.

Before the governor’s mandate to stay at home, North Central State loaned laptops to students, faculty, and staff to use at home. “I can’t be more thankful for the board’s support and backing up our decisions,” Diab says. “Right now, we are waiting for the federal stimulus monies and the state subsidy with its projected 20 percent cut this year. We are planning different scenarios to do what is best for students and staff. A lot depends on the circumstances in the summer and fall.”

Balancing Responsibilities with Trust

According to Dr. Jay Box, president of the Kentucky Community College System, the Board of Regents has been very supportive of allowing college administrators to handle operational issues. “It’s been good to see the board taking responsibility for supporting college operations and balancing that with their trust of administration to do their work,” says Box.

After trustees learned of the governor's shutdown of face-to-face instruction, their first major decision was to allow Box to stay on as system chancellor until the fall rather than appoint an interim this spring. "This was not the time for me to transition out, and once I made the decision to stay, I reached out to the board," Box says.

Of particular importance is communications at all levels now that staff is working remotely, Box says. In less stressful times, the board holds quarterly meetings, and Box communicated with trustees every two weeks. Now, however, the chancellor is providing weekly updates to the board, including some of his communications with the 16 community college presidents to provide weekly updates of internal communications to faculty, staff, and students and external communications to the community and media.

"Our systemwide communication plan is to do weekly videos to all faculty and staff and bimonthly communications to all employees and students to keep people in the loop," he says.

Executive Staff Assisting the President

Many presidents, like Iñisaġvik College's Bower, immediately turn to their senior executive staff or cabinet, and later their boards, to help with swift decision making. "In the case of COVID-19, I knew early on that we at Iñisaġvik would have to make some tough decisions. With this in mind, I connected with my senior leadership team right away, and we determined what's best for our students, our employees, and our communities across the North Slope. A closure and then a very slow minimal operations schedule would need to be implemented ASAP," she says.

"Once we had a plan, I notified our board, and have kept them notified via email throughout the past few weeks. They have communicated back with me via phone and emailed their support for the decisions we have made. This is how good decision making and good relationships happen," she adds. "The board trusts me."

Avoiding Micromanagement

To lead well in such stressful times, trustees and the administration need to work together. Boards need to assure comprehensive policies are in place for emergencies, and the president needs to implement those policies and have the authority to make time-sensitive decisions. When boards interfere with the president's ability to act to implement the emergency plan, they are engaging in micromanagement.

Micromanagement hurts the board-CEO relationship and often is based on a lack of trust. In all of its governance leadership institutes, training opportunities, retreats, and assessments, ACCT emphasizes the importance of the board-CEO relationship and the need to avoid second-guessing administrative decisions.

"Micromanaging often leads to conflict, confusion, and

dysfunction," says Colleen Allen, ACCT's director of retreats and evaluation services. "Boards need to show support for the CEO and empower him or her to do the job they are expected to do."

Now that the initial transition to online learning has successfully been made, trustees are using their voices to make their institutions' needs known and advocate for needed supports for their institutions, their students, and their communities. Going forward, trustees will also need to work with their presidents to assess the long-term financial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on their institutions. Fostering trust between boards and their presidents will be just as important in the months and years to come.



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For a copy of the San Diego CCD resolution, see: [https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/sdccd/Board.nsf/files/BMNQ9B649C89/\\$file/REVISED%20and%20SIGNED-SDCCD%20Resolution%20re%20Emergency%2003-12-20.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/sdccd/Board.nsf/files/BMNQ9B649C89/$file/REVISED%20and%20SIGNED-SDCCD%20Resolution%20re%20Emergency%2003-12-20.pdf)

Below are links to Infectious Disease policies of the County College of Morris, N.J.

- <https://www.ccm.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/aboutccm/policies/section6/6.1006.Infectious-Disease-Control-Policy-for-Students.pdf>
- <https://www.ccm.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/aboutccm/policies/section3/3.1015.Infectious-Disease-Control-Policy-for-Employees.pdf>

For Clark State Community College's *Interruptions of College Operations Policy*, call 937.328.6002 or email tolesm@clarkstate.edu.

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