

Educators frequently perceive community college trustees as grossly ignorant about higher education.

Corollary responsibilities of the community college board of trustees

by Dennis M. Shockley



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Although a sizable amount of literature exists dealing with community colleges, there is a scarcity of material about their trustees. Indeed, many books written about community colleges either omit the topic of trustees altogether, or only skim over it. James W. Thornton, Jr., for example, in *The Community Junior College*, a standard text of the two-year institution, devotes merely four pages to the trustees. This paucity of literature suggests the relative unimportance of the local board of trustees. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Trustees are frequently perceived by many educators, and often rightly so, as grossly ignorant about higher education and terribly uninformed about the board's general role in the governance of the community college. Therefore, some administrators would just as soon have a "rubber stamp" board, which abdicates its responsibilities to an administration that is trained in governing an educational institution. But the distinguishing characteristic of higher education in America is that **control** is vested in individuals or trustees who are not professional educators. This is a concept worth keeping. However, what good is "lay" control, if the "laymen" shirk their responsibilities?

Until recently only the student was held accountable for the success of his learning. But when a hospital patient fails to recover, is it the patient's fault? More and more, teachers and administrators are having to answer the question of accountability. Trustees are not exempt. The entire college must assume at least a large share of the responsibility for each student's failure, and the trustees have an obligation to perform the duties vested in their positions wisely.

The typical community college trustee is quite similar to his counterpart in the four-year college. Peter K. Mills in a survey of community college trustees found the typical trustee to be: "a Caucasian male; the holder of a bachelor's degree; a Protestant over 45; an executive, lawyer, doctor or small businessman who earns more than \$20,000 a year; married with children; a long-time community resident; a Republican who describes himself as a moderate, who has served as a trustee for more than five years, and who has other extensive public service." Also, he is a political animal; about 60 percent of the trustees are elected by popular, district elections, while the remaining forty percent are appointed, usually by the governor.¹

The few references describing the duties and functions of community college trustees are largely indistinguishable from those of four-year college trustees. Although they do have the same general responsibilities as their colleagues in four-year institutions, the community college trustees have, in addition, some very special problems. These include the special significance of institutional purpose, the dimly defined position of community colleges in the overall educational establishment, the complexities of the legal status of community colleges, and the specialized function of the trustee as a "layman" because of his close proximity to the institution.

Legally, community college boards are public corporations in which a group of trustees are empowered by statute to act as one person. As corporations, the boards have certain rights, to own property, to levy taxes, to sue and to be sued in the courts and to make all necessary rules for the governance of the college. Besides maintaining statutes, the boards are responsible for the hiring, and firing of personnel, setting of tuition, authorizing all expenditures and even selecting the design of buildings. But it is not these legal responsibilities of the board of trustees that are the most important to the college and the community it serves. Rather, there are other corollary responsibilities that need to be met.

The first and most important of these corollary responsibilities is that the board should be well informed. As general overseers of the college, board members must strive to be well informed not just on fiscal matters, but on the philosophy of the community college concept as well. Without a properly informed board of trustees, a community college's effectiveness can be severely weakened, particularly in regard to institutional objectives and fulfilling the community's educational needs.

The board of trustees must also approve a clearly written statement of purpose for which the college exists. In the community college, purpose is much more related to policy than in the four-year college. The evolution of a statement of purpose for a particular community college, while not solely the responsibility of the trustees, nonetheless needs their grasp of the needs of the local community. No board of trustees should take this responsibility lightly. A community college represents a tremendous investment in human and financial resources and the early decisions regarding its purposes will effect the students and community for a long time. In sum, "it is imperative to think through the philosophical base on which the college should be built, and to state rather specific objectives and means of accomplishment to carry out the philosophy."²

The board of trustees should seek to obtain a positive image for the college. This can be achieved in part if the board develops a clear code of ethics and behavior that is made available to the entire community. This code of ethics should be more than just a set of general guidelines. It must be precise. And when a board member violates the code, he should be replaced. In fact, a code of ethics and behavior should be written into state statute for full effectiveness, because except in cases of finance, boards of trustees are not held legally accountable for anything. Of course, the ethics of a board depends upon the integrity of individual members, and dubious behavior on their part will taint the image not only of the board, but the college as well. A positive image of the college is extremely difficult to obtain, if the local board of trustees has failed to establish its trustworthiness and believability.

Also, in creating a positive image of the college, the board should seek to involve the surrounding community with the campus. Local education groups, service organizations, civic groups and business associations should be invited to use the campus facilities of the college for their meetings and, if possible, to even observe the daily functioning of the academic complex. Besides the possible use of dining and conference rooms, other areas within the campus which could be opened to the public include the physical education facilities, the

theater or auditorium, child care centers, health centers, as well as special exhibits such as art displays.

Going hand in hand with creating the positive image of the college is the development and encouragement by the board of trustees of the open campus concept. This, of course, is designed around the principle that the college belongs to the community and the community belongs to the college. The true community college has an obligation to provide an open campus accessible to all people in the community, not just formally enrolled students. The very essence of the community college is to democratize education, to make education beyond high school available to all who desire it. And a natural adjunct to this principle is that the board should initiate policies that reflect the college as an institution with an open mind and for an open society. This would include a concerted effort to employ more minorities and particularly more women in the college. The administration and faculty should generally reflect the composition of the community, even if the elected or appointed board of trustees does not.

Another responsibility of the local board is to be knowledgeable about the fiscal matters of the college including familiarity with the buildings and grounds of the campus. It should not merely depend on the decisions made by the president and then "rubber stamp" them. With financial matters of a typical community college reaching into the millions, the local board must assume its role in overseeing this money. As with a private corporation, good fiscal management is essential. The selection of a chief business officer for the college should be taken on with the greatest meticulousness; he and the president have the two most important administrative jobs. However, again, the board must not divest their own fiscal responsibility in the business officer. The board should make a careful analysis of all expenditures, not simply "rubber stamp" the financial recommendations of the business officer. Also, when an informed board is familiar with the conditions of the buildings, grounds and equipment of the college, it is a better position to anticipate capital expenditures and to deal more knowledgeably with the fiscal problems of the college.

A board of trustees should exercise the responsibility of seeing that the college has a capable staff and appropriate programs and curricula. The board should familiarize itself with the criteria which the college administration uses for recommending the hiring of a person in addition to the minimum academic credentials. Particularly, the board should stress the importance of hiring individuals who will most likely fulfill the aims and objectives of the college generally and especially the mission of the community college. In addition, the board should be knowledgeable about programs and curricula; this is important to maintain quality. Essentially defunct programs should not be retained only to secure jobs. Programs and courses which flunk out a large number of students should be examined to find out why. This should not be only the concern of the administration. Boards need to know how the need of a curriculum is determined and the procedures taken in its development up to the time they approve it. A board should always realize that when a community can no longer absorb its graduates in a particular program, it should usually discontinue that program and use those resources in one or more other programs. Allocation of resources must be made on the basis of student and community need; not used to main-

tain absolute programs, save jobs, or in the case of some foreign languages, to perpetuate tradition.

Another responsibility of the local board is to review constantly its policies to determine whether or not they need revision. Many changes take place in a community college in a short period of time and a board must be innovative and move with the changes. It is important in relation to this, that board members understand the sources of college problems and be able to respond intelligently. The demand for accountability, racial tensions, student disorders and the unionization of the teaching profession all require direct attention by the board of trustees.

Faculty unionization and collective bargaining in higher education is growing faster on the two-year college level than on the four-year level. This is largely due to the fact that at a two-year institution, the faculty members generally have a greater course load and are paid less than their four-year counterparts. The record over the last few years shows that where unionization is planted, it thrives. Where faculties organize and obtain bargaining agents, they stay organized. Joseph Garbarino, author of **Faculty Bargaining: Change and Conflict**, and others agree that the highest amount of unionization will be achieved in the community colleges and the state college and university systems. In fact, of 212 college faculty unions in the United States in 1974, 150 were in community colleges.³ Among the chief dangers of faculty bargaining is the creation of an embattled and adversary spirit that is a deterrent to program planning and the goals of the community college. The chief defense against this danger is an effort by trustees, as well as administrators, to understand and appreciate the forces and motivation present is faculty acceptance of unionization and collective bargaining.

Finally, the board of trustees has a responsibility not to allow its statutory power and authority to be usurped by the college administration, particularly the president. Certainly, the selection of a president is the most important job that the board ever undertakes, but the president is the chief administrator of the college and the chief advisor to the board, not the chairman of the board. The trustees should always make it clear who sets the policy. By the same token the board should not involve itself in the administration of the college, that is the domain of the president. There is a fine line between the board's function as policymaker and the role of the president and others in the administration of the college, but it should not be crossed from either direction. A skillful balance must be maintained so that the college can function under

optimum conditions on the uppermost levels of control.

The principle and practice of local lay trusteeship in the community college is not guaranteed survival in the future. It could easily become an anachronism. Indeed, the national trend is toward statewide boards of control and coordination, and even away from the concept of "lay." Whether or not local lay trusteeship survives will depend in large part on the extent to which it meets a genuine need, and even more important on the extent to which it meets its own responsibilities to the college and to the community. If local boards do not accept their proper responsibilities, if they remain largely uninformed, then they deserve to have their power appropriated. And they will have to accept the responsibility for that.

Footnotes

1. Peter K. Mills, "Community College Trustees: A Survey," **The Two-Year College Trustee** (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1972), p. 35.
2. N. Dean Evans and Ross L. Neagley, *Planning and Developing Innovative Community Colleges* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 87.
3. Joseph W. Garbarino, **Faculty Bargaining: Change and Conflict** (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 55.

Other References

1. Charles C. Collins, "A Redefined Board for a Redefined Community," **Junior College Journal**, March, 1971, p. 100-106.
2. Richard Gilliland and Michael Y. Nunnery, "Florida Trustees: Characteristics and Opinions," **Junior College Journal**, February, 1970, p. 25-29.
3. Charles R. Monroe, **Profile of the Community College** (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1972).
4. William Moore, Jr., "The Community College Board of Trustees: A Question of Competency," **Journal of Higher Education**, March, 1973, p. 171-190.
5. Paul W. Parker, "Profile of the Kansas Trustees," **Junior College Journal**, April, 1970, p. 58-70.
6. Richard C. Richardson, Clyde E. Blocker, and Louis W. Bender, **Governance for the Two-Year College** (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
7. Mitchell Tendler and Richard E. Wilson, **Community College Trustees** (Washington, D.C.: Danforth Foundation, 1970).
8. "Trusteeship: An Overview," **Junior College Journal**, October, 1973, p. 7-21. This contains a number of short articles by seven knowledgeable authors in the field. It also contains an excellent bibliography on the governance of community colleges.