

Governing Board Role

Community college boards ensure the wise and prudent delivery of education, a critical local and state resource, on behalf of the people in their communities. They are guardians of and stewards for the public's interests. Trustees, as members of boards, ensure that the community college district fulfills its responsibility to lead and serve its ever-changing communities.

Lay boards create a link between educational institutions and their communities. They also buffer colleges from undue intrusion by government and single interests. Boards are responsible for the resources, performance and welfare of the institutions they govern. The task is tremendous, but the rewards associated with successfully overseeing the vitality of a community college are countless.

Community Colleges Make a Difference

The purpose of community colleges is to create a difference for their communities, regions, and the state. They exist in order that society benefits from educated citizens and a well-prepared workforce. They add to the economic, cultural, social, and intellectual health of their communities. They fulfill their role when students successfully achieve their goals.

Community colleges have long been known for opening their doors to many diverse groups of people and providing an opportunity for a better life. They are known for creating environments in which students learn, gain skills for employment, and become the kind of citizens that contribute back to society. Colleges are also known for being leaders in their communities to create a higher quality of life, promote collaboration and partnerships, adapt to rapid societal changes, and uphold values of open inquiry, integrity, and critical thinking.

The challenge for governing boards lies in establishing and focusing on a vision and mission that clearly define the expected impact of the district on the areas served by the college. It is the board's responsibility, on behalf of the public, to define what the end result of all of the colleges' efforts should be. Boards should define, in consultation with those they represent and with internal groups at the college, what the benefits of the college are for the community, who should receive those benefits, and the relative importance of the benefits. They explore and set expectations for the levels of success that students should achieve.

In meeting that challenge, boards look to the future and anticipate what will be needed for their communities. Trustees become involved in exciting, creative, thoughtful discussions as they explore the future and envision what they want their communities to be.

Trusteeship in a Nutshell

You are a member of a lay board that, as a unit—

- Governs through policy.
- Employs a chief executive officer as the institutional leader.
- Acts as a community bridge and buffer.
- Creates a climate for student success.
- Defines legal, ethical, and prudent standards for college operations.
- Assures fiscal health and stability.
- Maintains standards for good personnel relations.
- Monitors institutional performance.
- Leads as a thoughtful educated team.

Responsibilities of the Board

Strong, effective boards help create strong effective institutions by focusing on their own unique responsibilities. The board's role is significantly different than the roles of the CEO and others employed at the college. One way to think of it is that the board does not do the work of the institution, but ensures that it is done.

The Board is a Lay Board

Trustees are elected to a board that is responsible to represent the general citizenry for whom they hold the college in trust. The board should understand the values of its communities and should strive for decisions that incorporate the variety of external interests. Trustees come from all professions, including education, but are not on the board to practice their profession or represent a single interest.

The Board as a Unit

Trustees have authority only when they are meeting as a board. The board as a whole is the legal governing unit. Trustees contribute their collective talents, skills, and perspectives to their boards, but have no individual power. Individual trustees have no authority to direct any college staff, make no statements representing the board (unless they are reports of adopted board positions and policy), and support board decisions once they are made.

Governs through Policy

The most important board responsibility is to make good policy, which then provides guidance for college staff. Policy is defined as broad statements that set the general direction and standards for acceptable practice.

This emphasis on policy reflects the nature of trusteeship. Board members are community representatives who hire a CEO to lead the institution. The CEO hires staff members who have the expertise to implement board policy and fulfill the purposes of the institution. The system works best when trustees focus their efforts on representing community interests through the policies they adopt. The policies are most effective when they delegate the day-to-day operations to the CEO and college staff; the board can then concentrate on future needs and institutional effectiveness.

A primary policy focus for boards is the district's vision and mission. It requires that boards are strategic in their thinking and focused on the future learning needs of their communities. Trustees must be aware of broad and diverse community values and needs. They must provide leadership for the mission of the college to provide access, promote equity, and ensure that students are successful. They ensure that strategic and educational plans support what is needed for students and the community.

Boards adopt policies that guide the operations of the district. They periodically review their policy manual to ensure that it is both current and relevant.

Steps in Governing through Policy Direction

1. Allocate time to discuss policy values, future trends and community needs.
2. Periodically review, evaluate, and update college policies, including the mission and goals.
3. Consult with college employees on policy development.

Employs and Supports the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Successful governance requires a good board/CEO relationship. The CEO is the primary agent of the board and is the single most influential person in creating an outstanding institution. The most important decision the board makes is hiring the right CEO for the district, one who reflects and is committed to the board's goals and values. The relationship is maintained through ongoing support and clear evaluation.

The CEO and board function best as a team. While the CEO is hired to carry out board policies, trustees look to the CEO for guidance and educational leadership. Mutually agreed-upon clear descriptions and expectations of roles and responsibilities help ensure open communication, confidence and trust.

The CEO is responsible for preparing meeting agendas to the board and for the recommendations brought to the board. If a problem or issue comes to the attention of a trustee that is a matter for the board, it may be placed on a board agenda. If the problem is one that should be solved through administrative channels, the CEO will refer it to the appropriate staff member.

Goals in Board/CEO Relations

1. Select and retain the best CEO for the district.
2. Establish clear parameters and expectations for performance and evaluation.
3. Support the CEO.

Acts as a Community Bridge and Buffer

Trustees are an essential link with the community. They govern on behalf of the public and must be responsive to the needs of external constituents. They both represent the community to the college, and advocate for the college in the community and state. They can be powerful influences in building partnerships with business, industry, and government.

Boards also act as buffers from undue pressure on the institution from government and special interests. They ensure that administrators and faculty have the freedom necessary in higher education to explore and address a wide variety of issues and to expand the boundaries of knowledge.

Goals for Community Relations

1. Maintain a focus on external needs and trends.
2. Meet with community boards and groups to discuss and explore common issues.
3. Advocate for the college with the state and in the community.
4. Support the foundation and fundraising efforts.

Creates a Climate for Student Success

Boards set the tone for the entire district. Through their actions and behavior, boards can establish a climate in which learning is valued, professional growth is enhanced, and the most important goals are student success and making a difference for the community.

Trustees create a positive climate when they focus on the future and on student success, support risk taking, and positively challenge the CEO and college staff to strive for excellence. They establish and maintain high expectations for student success. They ensure that the strategic plan addresses what is needed for students to succeed.

Effective trustees, as individuals, strive for the “high road,” seek full participation in decision-making, and encourage and model innovation, leadership, and professional development.

Steps for a Positive Climate

1. Model a desire for learning and professional growth.
2. Focus on and monitor student success.
3. Support innovation.

Defines Parameters for Operations

Board policies contain the standards for ethical, legal, and prudent operations in the district. These policies guide the decisions of administrators, faculty, and classified staff as they design and implement the programs, services, and practices that achieve the goals of the district. Administrative regulations, written by staff, define how policy standards are applied on a day-to-day basis. Two major areas for which boards have important policy responsibilities are fiscal practice and human resources development.

Goals for Policy Parameters

1. Adopt legal, ethical, and prudent standards as policy.
2. Monitor adherence to legislative mandates and policy standards.
3. Adopt fiscal policies that ensure stability and effective use of funds.
4. Establish policy standards that employment practices are fair, legal, and designed to enhance employee performance.

Fiscal Health and Stability

Boards are responsible for ensuring that the public's money is spent wisely and well. Boards fulfill this responsibility best by establishing, as policy, their parameters or boundaries on the use of public funds, and by reviewing annual audits conducted by firms that they hire.

As trustees participate in budget discussions and approve the budget document, they are setting policies that will have great impact on the college. Budget allocations should be tied to achieving the mission and goals of the college, and should reflect educational priorities.

Establish High Standards for Good Personnel Relations

In essence, the CEO is the only employee the board has. However, boards should establish policy parameters that ensure that the selection, evaluation, and dismissal procedures for all employees are legal, fair, clear, and appropriate, and that equal opportunity philosophies are followed. Effective boards set a positive climate for collective bargaining and dispute resolution, and model principled negotiations.

Monitors the Performance of the Institution

Boards have the responsibility to hold colleges accountable for achieving student success and serving their communities. As stated earlier, a major role of boards is to define the general outcomes or goals of the college in terms of student success and benefits to the community. . Once these are established, boards should monitor the progress made toward those ends. For instance, if the board determines that, because of the college, students should have the skills and knowledge needed to excel in employment and/or in universities, then the board should ask for reports related to progress toward those goals.

Goals for Monitoring

1. Monitor progress toward goals and adherence to policy.
2. Use pre-established criteria.
3. Establish a schedule for reports.

Boards also monitor adherence to the legal, ethical and prudent expectations defined in policy related to college operations. Boards should establish the criteria and indicators used to monitor progress and adherence to policies prior to the actual monitoring, so that the CEO and staff know what is expected of them.

Leads as a Thoughtful, Ethical, Educated Team

Good trusteeship requires the ability to function as part of a team, and a team functions best when the members are well informed and act objectively. Trustees are expected to speak openly for their points of view during the decision-making process, and to support the position of the board once the decision is made.

Boards model civility and professionalism by working well together and handling conflict constructively. A fragmented, fractious board that is mired in administrative detail lowers morale, wastes resources, and reduces the ability of the district to achieve its goals. Dysfunctional boards hurt the perceived value of the colleges.

Good boards are also analytical in their thinking. Trustees contribute to board effectiveness by listening well, asking good questions, and clarifying for themselves and staff members their most important values and priorities. Asking questions and listening to answers ensures that issues are explored thoroughly and that policy decisions are based on thoughtful deliberation and comprehensive understanding.

Effective boards are future-oriented and strategic in their thinking. They recognize that today's world requires flexible institutions and personnel who are willing to evolve, adapt, and grow in response to the changing needs of society. Trustees who act with vision, intelligence, curiosity, and enthusiasm help create a board that is a positive agent for change.

Leadership Steps

1. Seek and consider many points of view and sources of information.
2. Focus on future needs and plans.
3. Be positive and supportive.
4. Show respect for each other and the staff.
5. Be ethical; act with integrity.

Board Effectiveness

The ultimate criteria for assessing the effectiveness of the board and the CEO are how well the institution is meeting its goals and fulfilling its mission. If the institution is not succeeding in educating students, the board and the CEO must look at their own performance as the leadership team of the district. Positive assessments of board and CEO performance mean little if their colleges are in trouble.

Richard Chait conducted a study that found that boards associated with effective colleges were strong on six dimensions. Effective boards envision and shape institutional direction, cultivate processes that sharpen priorities, ensure a strategic approach to the future, and anticipate potential problems (strategic dimension). They draw upon multiple perspectives to make decisions and recognize the complexities and subtleties in the decisions they face (analytical dimension). Effective boards understand the contextual dimension of their decisions and take into account the culture and values of the institution. They rely on the institutional mission and traditions as guides for decision-making.

Effective boards ensure that trustees are educated about the institution and their roles (educational dimension). Effective boards also nurture the cohesiveness of the board as a group and are strong on the interpersonal dimension. They understand the political dimension and recognize the need to develop and maintain healthy relationships among key constituencies. They analyze problems and situations using diverse values and contributions from many different groups.

In a more recent study, Chait, Ryan and Taylor found that the most effective boards performed three roles very well: fiduciary, strategic, and generative. The fiduciary role addresses the stewardship of tangible assets such as the budget, the facilities, and compliance with laws and regulations. In its strategic role, the board focuses on the key issues related to fulfilling the district's mission. The board's attention shifts from conformance to fiduciary standards to institutional performance. The generative mode is when the board provides leadership to the college by ensuring that trustees and college leaders engage in productive and creative discussions on educational policy and issues. They have courageous conversations about student success outcomes and how they can be improved.

Clark Kerr and Miriam Gade conducted an earlier study and found that effective boards consisted of concerned members who acquiesced to the responsibilities and constraints of being a board member. The most effective boards were those that concentrated on results, attended to major aspects of policy and performance, and did not try to administer. Trustees on effective boards tended to operate in a consensual or collegial manner and supported decisions the board made as a whole.

Statutory Responsibilities

The California Education Code contains laws that govern community colleges and define the roles and responsibilities of governing boards. Boards and trustees are also subject to provisions of the Open Meetings Act (Brown Act), Fair Political Practices Act, and laws pertaining to conflicts of interest. In addition, the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges has established regulations and policies (contained in Title 5 of the California Administrative Code) that implement legislation and further delimit the authority of local governing boards.

The following responsibilities are stated in Education Code Section 70902, which authorizes and defines local boards. The section also authorizes local boards to delegate their power to the chief executive officer and other college staff and committees, unless specifically prohibited by law.

1. Establish rules and regulations not inconsistent with the regulations of the Board of Governors and the laws of this state.
2. Establish policies for and approve comprehensive, academic, and facilities plans.
3. Establish policies for and approve courses of instruction and educational programs.
4. Establish academic standards and graduation requirements.
5. Employ all personnel and establish employment practices.
6. Determine budgets within legal constraints, and determine the needs for tax and bond elections.
7. Manage and control district property.

8. Establish procedures for effective involvement in the local decision-making process.
9. Establish rules for student conduct.
10. Establish fees as required by law.
11. Accept grants, gifts, and scholarships.
12. Provide auxiliary services as necessary.
13. Determine the academic calendar.
14. Participate in the Board of Governors' state consultation process.

In general, boards of trustees in California delegate significant authority to the CEO, as well as to the Academic Senate according to Title 5 regulations. Effective boards limit their role to developing broad policy and providing oversight in the areas listed above, and delegate the responsibility for administrative and professional duties to the professionals in the colleges.

Legal responsibilities of boards are also touched on in other chapters of this Handbook.

Summary

Community college governing boards are elected by and come from the community. In turn, they strive to be responsive to the immediate and long-term needs of the community. They are most effective when they focus on their relationship with external communities, their policy-making role, and their responsibility to monitor the progress of their institutions. Trustees face the awesome challenge to seek out, consider and balance many diverse values and interests as they engage in the policy-making process that guides their colleges to excellence and success.