

Trusteeship

Most trustees of California's community colleges seek the position because they have a sincere desire to serve and give back to the community. They believe in the mission and wish to play a role in ensuring access to and success in high quality education. They want to make a difference by serving as a member of the governing board.

Trustees are entrusted with the success of community colleges, institutions that fulfill an essential public good. Being a trustee for an educational institution is not the same as being a member of a legislative body, such as a city council. Their role and primary responsibility is to protect and promote the community college district. As elected officials, they must consider and represent the many interests in their communities. Therefore, they have the duty to uphold what is good for the college district above all other interests and rights.

The job is demanding and time-consuming. It requires sophisticated interpersonal skills as well as the abilities to understand complex information and balance multiple interests. However, the rewards are great and the results are essential for society's well-being.

Trustee Responsibilities

- Honor the "team" nature of the board.
- Allocate time to prepare for and attend meetings.
- Participate in trustee development.
- Serve as an advocate and liaison between the college and the community.
- Actively support the college and the CEO and staff.
- Ensure that all district business is channeled through the CEO.
- Have a positive, visionary mindset; support the mission of the college to provide access, promote equity, and assure student success.

Responsibilities of Trusteeship

Trustees are individuals. However, effective trusteeship occurs only through being a valuable member of a team of people who, together, comprise the legal unit that governs a district. Being successful as a trustee is measured by the effectiveness of the board as a whole.

Effective trustees are those who make sincere efforts to work with others on the board in a cooperative, collegial manner and who are willing to abide by principles that contribute to board effectiveness. Being a member of the leadership team involves respect and consideration for others and for the responsibilities of trusteeship.

As individuals, trustees are most successful when they fulfill the following responsibilities.

Time Commitment

Being a trustee is a significant commitment of time and energy. On the average, trustees spend anywhere from 3 to 10 hours a week on work related to the board. Sufficient time should be allocated for studying board meeting agenda items and other materials related to governing the district, attending board meetings and others related to board work, participating in community events to represent the district, attending college events, and participating in conferences designed to strengthen trustee knowledge and skills.

Attendance

Trustees should participate in board meetings and workshops, and ensure they arrive on time and are prepared for the meeting. In addition, effective trustees show their support for the district by attending college events and visibly supporting the college in the community. They support fundraising efforts, and may contribute to the foundation to the best of their ability. They advocate for the college in the community and with state and local officials.

Trustee involvement, however, should not extend into the day-to-day life of the college. Trustees should not be on campus to a degree that it is perceived as interfering or micromanaging college activities. They should not ask special favors of staff members or attempt to direct staff activities.

Knowledge

Governing thoughtfully and making wise decisions require being knowledgeable about effective governance, the colleges, and the social and economic trends that affect education. This Trustee Handbook covers essential knowledge for trustees, including the state system and governance of the colleges, board roles and standards of practice, board and CEO relations, educational policy and quality, fiscal policy, human resources policy and relations with staff, and resources for trustees. The League also publishes numerous other materials for trustees and CEOs, and encourages trustees to learn from other organizations as well. The League's brochure, *Trusteeship: Tasks, Knowledge and Skills*, lists specific areas of knowledge trustees should have.

Trustees gain knowledge and skills through a thorough and ongoing orientation to the district and its colleges and centers. They understand their college's history, traditions, and culture. They read voraciously. They attend conferences to learn more about educational policy and to enhance their skills and effectiveness. They seek out and are aware of community needs and interests in order to better represent the community. They ask for and understand research on how students are succeeding and what is required for student success.

Trustees, particularly new ones, allocate significant time for reading and study. They prepare for board meetings by thoroughly reading the agenda and asking questions of the CEO and other board members to clarify items and gain background information.

Mindset and Vision

Effective trustees are visionary. They focus about the future of the colleges and how societal trends might influence the district's mission. They act with intelligence and curiosity and engage in critical thinking when presented with problems and issues.

Effective trustees are analytical. They seek and consider many points of view and are able to recognize the complexities and subtleties in the decisions they face. They take into account the culture and values of the institution. They are "results-oriented" and help their boards and the CEO focus on student success.

Effective trustees are thoughtful. When faced with decisions, they take time to assess which course of action will best benefit the district and best reflects the appropriate role of the board. They also reflect on their own performance and that of the board. They are willing to engage in self-evaluation and to use the results to improve their own and the board's performance. They are willing to engage in courageous conversations about student and institutional performance.

Communication

Open, straightforward and tactful communication builds trust; trustees with strong interpersonal skills contribute much to board functioning. They recognize the need to develop and maintain healthy relationships among key constituencies

Effective trustees show respect by honoring communication protocols and lines of authority within the district. Respect for the CEO and fellow board members includes following the principle of "no surprises." Publicly communicating one's support for and confidence in the CEO contributes to a strong CEO/board partnership.

Ethics and Conflicts of Interest

Trustees who understand and uphold the ethics and values inherent in being a member of the board contribute much. The chapter on ethics in this Trustee Handbook covers key principles in ethical public service. It is good practice and an accreditation standard that each board has and abides by a code of ethics; all trustees should be familiar with their own board's policy statement.

By law, all elected state and local officials must avoid conflicts of interest in the performance of their duties, and must file statements of economic interests. Public officials have a conflict of interest when they use the position to influence a policy decision that will affect their financial interest in material ways.

Effective trustees are scrupulous about avoiding even the perception that there are conflicts of interest. They are aware that appearing to act to benefit their own interests (or those who are close to them) at the cost of the district will harm their credibility and trustworthiness.

Using Influence Effectively

Given that trusteeship is best expressed as a member of the board, good trustees learn how to effectively influence board decisions and district direction. As community representatives, they bring perspectives that contribute to the policy direction of the district. They return from conferences and community meetings with ideas that they may want to see implemented in their own districts. A key to success is to use appropriate ways to share ideas, place items on board agendas, and influence discussions.

Savvy trustees use their influence on the board itself; they do not use it to direct staff activities. They understand that CEOs and board chairs are the contact points for specific ideas and suggestions.

Every board should have a process for individual trustees to place items on the board agenda. Trustees, particularly new ones, should discuss such items with the CEO or board chair in order to understand relevant history and background. Timing is often everything in ensuring that ideas are listened to; effective trustees research and plan the timing of their proposals.

Influencing board decisions involves being well prepared, having good information, and building strong relationships with other board members. People are more likely to listen to someone who has been supportive and positive, and is willing to listen to and respect all ideas.

Summary

Community college trusteeship, done well, is an invaluable service to the board, the colleges, and the community. It requires a significant commitment of time and dedication to learning. The best trustees are open-minded, thoughtful, visionary, and capable of seeing the “big picture.” They have excellent interpersonal skills and work well with diverse people and personalities. They are supportive and benevolent, enthusiastic and energetic. They are trustworthy.

"There is no other way that as few people can raise the quality of American society as far and as fast as can trustees and directors of our voluntary institutions, using the strengths they now have in the positions they now hold."

– Robert K. Greenleaf