

GOVERNANCE FOR CHANGING TIMES: PROMOTING LEARNING AND  
SUSTAINABILITY

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### **Governing Boards Create Community Colleges for the Future**

The commonly accepted dichotomy in educational leadership—administration vs. governance—takes governance for granted. Community college educators talk so much about the importance of administration in community colleges, that the assumption that governance plays a role in the leadership equation is too often overlooked (McPhail, 2005). While it is generally understood that a trustee is a party who is given legal responsibility to hold property in the best interest of or for the benefit of the institution, the term “trustee” is not broad enough to describe the responsibilities which the community college trustee must assume.

Community college trustees have the responsibility for building an institution which, with increasing accountability, can serve the contemporary student and the student of tomorrow. Governing boards create community colleges for the future. It is precisely this key function that makes the community college trustee's role so vital to sustaining and facilitating the continued evolution of the community college. Community college governing boards need to understand the historical mission of the community college in order to understand the contemporary calls for change and reorganization for the future of community colleges.

Few voices have proclaimed the importance of understanding the role of the trustees within the context of creating change for community colleges. In addition, little has been done to involve community college trustees in meaningful change initiatives. While there might be some disagreement about the role of trustees in the governance of institutions, ultimately, trustees are responsible for rethinking, redefining, and restructuring their institutions. In trying to understand

the future of community colleges, we need to ask, "Where are the trustees in creating change for the future of community colleges?"

### **The Great Potential: Connecting Governance to Teaching and Learning**

Carver and Mayhew (1994) suggested that boards must explicitly design their own products and processes. They observed that boards rarely enunciate and hold fast to the principles guiding their own operation, making them appear directionless and even at times capricious. Trustees must position themselves to lead change. Connecting governance to learning and sustainability is a strategic mechanism that provides a focus for trustees to govern community colleges. We define learning as an outcome - the end product of some process. It can be recognized or seen. Effective governing boards are in the forefront of shaping the process and the product. This requires governing boards to assume a leadership role in connecting policies and procedures to the intended product--learning.

This notion might be by far one of the most challenging aspects of institutional governance for the next several decades. However, making the shift to creating and leading change is not a "one-size fits all" proposition for governing boards. Each board will need to interpret the needs of their college in a form that is applicable to their own institution and the overall mission of the college. Trustees must begin to see themselves as educational leaders charged with the responsibility of creating and leading change that enhances student success and sustainability.

## **The Board Room as a Laboratory for Defining Institutional Change Strategies**

Trustees have different backgrounds (Smith, 2000), face things differently, and need to learn different things. The board room is the perfect laboratory to create and lead change for the community college. All trustee organizations have goals, boundaries, and levels of authority, communications systems, coordinating mechanisms, and distinctive procedures (Bolman & Deal, 1991). The traditional paradigm of governance has, at best, resulted in compliance to rules, regulations, and policies. In many cases, it has produced mediocre to competent governance. It often results in narrow thinking, board dependency on the CEO, and board focus on process and procedure rather than outcomes/results. Learning-centered governance requires the board to transcend the boundaries of the traditional governance model (McPhail, 2005).

Governing boards must look for ways to integrate learning and sustainability into all aspects of the governance process. There is a major benefit of a change-oriented governance focus--the governing board is liberated from roles that no longer serve any meaningful function and that may have outlived their purpose. The notion that the board room is a laboratory for defining institutional change may be far-fetched for some, but we see it as a strategic approach to integrating learning and sustainability into the art of the policy making activities of the college. It might enable the board to provide trusteeship at a much deeper level than is presently realized under the current structure of institutional governance.

Boards of trustees must redefine their roles and accept responsibility for changing policies and practices that are consistent with the principles undergirding the mission of the community college. By promoting learning and sustainability, trustees can no longer be tied down to outdated practices and procedures. In order to promote learning and sustainability, trustees will need to make expedient decisions that support

new programs and delivery systems. When the board makes it clear that learning and the future of the community college are the foundations for its policy making, stakeholders will see that systemic change is taking place.

### **Learning and Sustainability should be Infused into Board Training and Development**

Community College educators speak with tremendous pride about the transformative power of the community college. The future of the community college is literally in the hands of the governing board. Thus, governing boards will need to make decisions today while ensuring an equitable educational future for the next generation of community college learners.

In order for trustees to govern in a manner consistent with the forces converging on the board room, they must change or risk being ineffective. Just as the students and structures of the colleges are changing, the ways that trustees govern must change. The culture of governance is changing: the definition of effective governance is changing. The new definition of governance should include terms such as learning outcomes, student success, and sustainability. These terms present a logical framework for trustees to change the way they govern. For examples of perspectives on trustees' role in learning, see O'Banion, T. (1997). *The learning revolution: A guide for community college trustees*. [Special issue]. *The Trustee Quarterly*, 1, 2-19.; McPhail, C. J. (2000, December 12). *Reframing governance: At a true learning college, trustees have a lot to learn, too*. *Community College Times*, pp.3, 6.; McPhail, C.J. *Learning-centered governance*. In C.J. McPhail (Ed.) (2005). *Establishing and sustaining learning centered community colleges*; and Derek Bok. December 16, 2005. "The critical role of trustees in enhancing student learning." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, B12.

## Governance for Changing Times

Then, what does change really mean for trustees who may want to shift from traditional governance to a more focused approach? Learning and sustainability provide a vehicle for trustees to focus on the most important issues facing community colleges— student success and the future of the community college. The following five strategies present a hands-on process for trustees to promote learning and sustainability of community colleges:

- 1) Link governance to learning and sustainability —Designate specific time on the Board Agenda for the president or designee to provide a brief description or explanation of the items relating to learning and sustainability. The description would explain how any action improves and expand student learning at the college. The description could also link the board action to the implementation of institutional practices that promote sustainability such as recycling.
- 2) Develop Learning-centered and sustainability policies-- Campus leaders could work with trustees to provide a written preface to each major policy issue related to learning outcomes and sustainability action items. The preface would explain why this issue now comes to the board and how it improves and expands learning at the college. It would also explain how this particular policy is designed to sustain the college.
- 3) Integrate learning outcomes and sustainability into local and national college initiatives— College leaders can conduct focus groups and presentations as ways to promote and elevate trustee engagement in campus and community activities. Faculty from different disciplines can be empowered to engage in regular conversations about the significance of board involvement in discipline-related activities at the college and the community.
- 4) Create learning-centered and sustainability vision statements-- The vision statements would serve as the driving force behind the decisions made by the board of trustees. The statements could be placed in prominent positions on the campus and on business cards.
- 5) Establish professional development training programs—Board development programs about the board's role in promoting learning outcomes and sustainability of the college should be developed by local colleges and at the national level. This type of board development takes on an action orientation as trustees' critical reflection includes support and promotion of learning and sustainability of the college.

**Effective Governance Requires Internal and External Engagement**

Engagement of trustees can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in the community to solve a problem or interact with internal constituencies. Trustee engagement encompasses a range of activities such as working on committees, serving on non-profit boards, working with civic and community agencies, local, regional and national associations, and writing letters to elected officials.

How can you promote the idea of internal and external engagement of trustees when so few educational leaders and, in some cases, trustees do not view trustees as educational leaders? We believe that with appropriate information, trustees can become strong supporters of learning and sustainability. Armed with accurate information, they will be able to see that by integrating these principles into their governance practices they can fundamentally change community college education.

Governance for changing times requires trustees to see governance as a way to strengthen the mission of the community college; a system that creates a kaleidoscope of learning options for a diverse population of learners. It also provides opportunities for trustees, as leaders, to work with campus leaders to ensure a solvent future for the college. It becomes a case of “lead the leaders.”

For example, national community college associations such as the National Council of Instructional Administrators (NCIA), the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of Community College Trustees and the Society for College and University Planning could collaborate with core groups of trustees to launch a national conversation about connecting learning and sustainability to governance practices in community colleges. A key purpose for

## Governance for Changing Times

involving trustees in conversations about learning outcomes is to create a common ground for stimulating, improving and expanding learning options for the community college learner. In addition, the concept of connecting governance to sustainability should affirm what is centrally important to the role of the trustees -- maintaining and sustaining strong community colleges.

The challenge here is that the results of trustees' governance activities are often confined to the board room. While trustees may make decisions that influence learning outcomes and sustainability of the college, the results of those actions are rarely attributed to the board's efforts in the process. However, the important players in the articulation of the outcomes of their actions are the trustees themselves. Trustees have the power to promote learning and sustainability of community colleges by exercising their role as educational leaders and in producing the changes needed to face the challenges of sustaining community colleges for the next generation of learners.

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## Governance for Changing Times

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## Governance for Changing Times

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