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Identifying campus ‘curmudgeons’

By Terry O’Banion, Published April 15, 2015

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In 2014, Terry O'Banion completed the first survey of its kind on presidential perceptions of “curmudgeons” in the community college. Details on the characteristics of curmudgeons, their behaviors and motivations, and the damage they do, as well as strategies presidents use to mitigate that damage, are reported in a monograph “Curmudgeons in the Community College: Barriers to Change.” This article is an excerpt from the monograph which can be [ordered](#) from the [League for Innovation](#).

“CAVE” people was how one respondent described curmudgeons — Colleagues Against Virtually Everything. His description of CAVE people (quotes from presidents are italicized) captures the essential core of a curmudgeon:

- On any given subject, they are right and you are wrong. No matter the topic, the evidence, or the documentation their position prevails, and rational discussion is simply not possible.

A number of respondents echoed this same theme about the behavior of curmudgeons:

- In my experience, regardless of the issue, a curmudgeon takes the most extremist position. Nothing is ever enough.
- Curmudgeons with whom I have worked at different colleges share common characteristics. They seek the spotlight to air their differences of opinion or grievances. They appear to gain satisfaction from disrupting or delaying important decisions with which they do not agree.

The word “negative” was the most used word to describe the behavior of curmudgeons as indicated in these sample statements:

- Their motives are most often centered on self and approached from a negative aspect.
- They just want attention even if it is negative.
- Curmudgeons are negative in their approach to solving issues.

O’Banion will report the results of his study at the [AACC Annual Convention](#) on Monday, April 20, at 10 a.m. George Boggs, president emeritus of the [American Association of Community Colleges](#), will join him for discussion.

Resistant to change was one of the top characteristics respondents used to describe the actions and behaviors of curmudgeons. Respondents felt that curmudgeons tended to live in the past and had difficulty in adjusting to changes in educational philosophy and practice. One president shared a story that illustrates an example of resistance to change.

The story may be apocryphal, but one president shared the story of an event that he said happened to a new president he knew. The new president wanted to connect with faculty and remarked to one of the older members, “Harry, I bet you have seen a lot of changes at this college since you have been here.” Harry replied, “I sure have, and I have been against every damned one of them.”

Respondents commented on the resistance to change as a major behavioral factor in curmudgeons:

- They object to every new initiative because they oppose all change from the status quo.
- They grieve everything that can be grieved to halt change.
- There is constant yearning for some bygone era in which they felt more comfortable.

The president’s gadfly was a major theme cited by respondents — not surprising since the respondents were all presidents but also not surprising because a fundamental characteristic of curmudgeons is their propensity to confront authority. In the community college, the target can be anyone in charge (deans, vice presidents, committee chairs, faculty senate presidents, etc.), but the president is the most visible and the most often attacked target of curmudgeons. Most of the behaviors reported by presidents had to do with how curmudgeons perceived the president’s actions or behaved toward them.

- They have a great desire to “stand up to the man.”
- They are the ones who, when faced with the facts, still do not believe anything the administration is saying. Some have been downright vicious caring only about tearing down the organization rather than building it up. They complain that the leaders do not communicate.
- When not making a direct attack against the president’s character or integrity, the curmudgeon will constantly drop insidious gossip and state inaccurate information and events he is hearing from all the campus “chatter and noise going on out there.” There are never any specifics.

In summary, curmudgeons can be organized into three key groups: those who are virtually against everything, those who are resistant to change and those who play the gadfly to the president. From this brief review it is also possible to identify some of the primary tactics used by curmudgeons:

- Curmudgeons often use humor and sarcasm as weapons.
- Intimidation is one of their primary tools.
- They are often aggressive and belligerent against anyone who disagrees with them.
- Faced with new initiatives they like to point out past failures: “We tried that before and it did not work.”
- They use body language (eye-rolling, quizzical looks and shoulder shrugs) to make their points.
- Curmudgeons are smug and surly and almost always negative.
- They move with ease between rational and irrational positions.
- They are unwilling to listen to alternative viewpoints.
- They are often disruptive when others are making a point.
- Curmudgeons are usually rude, condescending, patronizing and unprofessional.
- They like to push the buttons of others.

- Curmudgeons are the ultimate contrarians.
- Curmudgeons are bullies.

These are the kinds of behaviors that contribute to a negative climate on a campus that slows and stops change at a time when many community college leaders are working hard to transform their institutions to better serve students. We have not identified or studied the impact of curmudgeons on a college's culture until this study; but it is clear that curmudgeons have considerable impact on other faculty and on college leaders — impact that can be very damaging.

As we learn more about who they are and what they do we will be better prepared to mitigate the negative impact and perhaps work with them to channel their concerns into positive impact.

O'Banion is president emeritus of the [League for Innovation in the Community College](#) and chair of the graduate faculty at [National American University](#).