

Who Are the Curmudgeons?

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Curmudgeons are well represented in every kind of American institution—religious organizations, government, corporations, foundations, hospitals, unions, etc. They are particularly visible in the world of education which may provide a fertile crucible for the production of curmudgeons. A recent study on curmudgeons in community colleges—the first of its kind—tells us who they are.

Definition of Curmudgeons

To better understand the curmudgeons in community colleges the author, with assistance from fourteen national community college leaders, created a definition of curmudgeons. Participants in this process were asked to focus on the negative characteristics of curmudgeons because we were ultimately interested in their negative impact on colleagues and colleges. A case can be made for affable and even well-meaning curmudgeons, but that is a project for another time.

After numerous iterations the following definition was accepted as the definition that would guide this study.

Curmudgeons are contrarians who take enormous pleasure and pride in thinking otherwise. They can be cantankerous naysayers acting as self-appointed gadflies to the president or other leaders, including leaders of their own constituencies. Collaboration and civility do not seem to be values they hold in high esteem. They are quite vocal and opinionated and appear to prefer heated debate and prolonged circular discussion to solving problems and reaching consensus. Curmudgeons can be memorable characters with a certain flair or style often using humor and sarcasm to play to their audiences.

In the fall of 2013 a survey created by the author was distributed to 375 community college presidents who are members of the League for Innovation's Alliance—a quarterly survey issued by the League to determine presidential perspectives on community college issues. Seventy-seven presidents responded to the initial survey for a return rate of 20.5% which is average for similar quarterly surveys by the League.

To gain a general understanding of the number, gender, discipline affiliations, and impact of curmudgeons, as perceived by presidents, six questions were asked of this initial group of 77 participants with space provided for additional comments. Selected comments included in this essay appear in italics.

Number of curmudgeons: Ninety-seven percent of the respondents indicated they had worked at a community college that had a curmudgeon who reflected the study definition. Asked how

many curmudgeons they had known 29% indicated from 1—3, 32% indicated from 4—6, 18% indicated from 7—9, and 18% indicated 10 or more. Even though a return rate of 20.5% is low for some studies, and even though those who returned the surveys may reflect a bias that differs from those who did not return the surveys, the impression from these data suggests that many community college presidents are well acquainted with curmudgeons. Ninety-seven percent indicated they had known a curmudgeon, and 18% had known 10 or more.

Comments from the respondents provided further insight about the numbers:

They are everywhere!

I call them resident Nazis!

True curmudgeons have been rare in my experience but prominent in my memory.

Gender of curmudgeons: Asked the gender of the curmudgeons they had known the presidents indicated 58% had been male and 2.5% had been female. However, 38% indicated that men and women were equally represented in curmudgeons they had known. Clearly, in this study men are more likely to be curmudgeons than women. There were only a few responses to this question, but several were quite interesting:

Females have been the most ugly in public; males operate more behind the scene.

This seems to be an equal opportunity position.

Employee classification of curmudgeons: Eight categories were provided for respondents to identify the employee group in which most of the curmudgeons they had known were members: classified staff, executive administrators, mid-level management, full-time faculty, part-time faculty, student services, students, and trustees. Full-time faculty was selected by 82% of the respondents. Mid-level management was selected by 6.4%, trustees by 3.8%, and students by 2.5%. Full-time faculty are clearly the primary source of curmudgeons as perceived by the presidents in this study. Only one person identified part-time faculty as the group most representative of curmudgeons.

It must be pointed out, however, even though presidents perceived more curmudgeons among faculty than among other groups of employees, the actual number of curmudgeons on a campus at any one time is quite small. The great majority of faculty and other employees on a college campus are deeply committed to student learning and success and to working in an environment where collaboration, civility, and respect frame the culture of the organization. A few curmudgeons on a campus have more impact than their numbers warrant—another reason to study them.

Comments about the categories of curmudgeons provide additional insights. Union membership was not a category, but some respondents noted union affiliation as a category that should have been included:

The curmudgeon is institutionalized through the faculty union, but I only say this for unionized environments; in non-union environments it is often the mid-level managers.

The majority I have known were/are faculty union representatives, but my current system head qualifies as do many state system officers.

Trustees can be curmudgeons and often create disciples among vice presidents and professional and classified staff who feel protected by the trustee.

Discipline affiliation of curmudgeons: The 82% who identified full-time faculty as the group most represented by curmudgeons were also asked to identify the primary discipline of these curmudgeons from a list of 9 options. Both Humanities/Arts and Social Science were selected by 27% of the respondents as the discipline areas most representative of curmudgeons; 54% of all curmudgeons come from these two areas. Other was selected by 16%, Career and Technical Education by 6% and Mathematics by 5%. Health Services and Library Services were selected by 2.5% each, and Community Services and Student Services were not selected by any of the respondents.

Comments about discipline affiliations added a bit more nuance with a number of respondents pointing out that other factors are more important than discipline affiliation in identifying curmudgeons:

This is not a disciplinary characteristic but an individual one. It is usually a veteran faculty member, tenured or quite senior.

Retired faculty are sometimes curmudgeons.

Business faculty, or those who have operated their own business, tend to produce the most curmudgeons. They focus on different topics than those from the humanities and social sciences.

Humanities and social science faculty tend to have more than their share of curmudgeons

Impact on the college: Of the 77 respondents in this study, 86% indicated impact on the college of curmudgeons they had known was either negative (49.3%) or highly negative (36.3%). Keep in mind that we, by definition, were looking only at negative curmudgeons so it is not too surprising that presidents would judge their impact on the college to be negative.

Curmudgeons create much damage. Presidents and vice presidents, as well as faculty and staff, have often left because of them---sometimes our best not close to retirement.

The curmudgeons I know gained power and influence by playing into others worst

fears about senior administrative decisions. Their influence was very disruptive; they did not speak the truth but were very difficult to counter.

These folks are toxic; they can manipulate opinions and cause a tremendous amount of toxicity in the culture of a college.

They create enormous havoc by dominating every college meeting with their personal and undocumented anecdotes which they turn into generalizations with which they browbeat the junior or part-time faculty. They stunt our growth.

In summary, this study tells us that:

- Ninety-seven percent of the respondents indicated they had known a curmudgeon who fits the definition in the study. Eighteen percent indicated they had known ten or more.
- Fifty-eight percent indicated the curmudgeons they had known were male and 2.5% female. However, 38% of respondents indicated males and females were equally represented.
- Full-time faculty members were identified by 82% of the respondents as the primary group representing curmudgeons.
- Twenty-seven percent of the respondents who had selected faculty selected Humanities/Arts, and 27% selected Social Science as the most representative disciplines of curmudgeons. These two areas represent 54% of all curmudgeons in this study.
- Eighty-six percent of the respondents indicated that the impact of curmudgeons on the college was either negative (49.3%) or highly negative (36.3%).

Every community college has a curmudgeon. Most community colleges have more than one. They tend to resist and slow change; and they can cause enormous damage to the college and to their colleagues. For further information on the behavior, motivation, and damage caused by curmudgeons and the strategies leaders use to mitigate that damage see *Community College Curmudgeons: Barriers to Change* from which this essay is an excerpt. Published by National American University and the League for Innovation copies can be ordered from the League at www.league.org