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Disruptive Forces: College Leaders Feel the Impact of Rogue Trustees

I developed the term “rogue trustee” to describe behaviors I observed recently while conducting a survey of 59 community college presidents in 16 states. As I state in my report, “Rogue trustees run roughshod over the norms and standards of behavior expected of public officials appointed or elected to office. They place their own interests over the interests of the college. They violate written and unwritten codes of conduct. They tend to poison the culture of the college instead of helping to create a sense of community, collaboration, innovation, and common values. They become the catalyst for increased defensiveness, paranoia, subterfuge, and fear. In short, they cause enormous damage.” (O'Banion 2009)

These are not just troublesome trustees, or maverick or reformer trustees; these are more extreme cases of trustees who act as rogues as the term is used to identify rogue elephants, rogue cops, or rogue states. The gauge that marks their difference from troublesome trustees is the enormous damage they do; they have major impact disproportionate to their numbers in the community college world.

Among community college leaders there are whispered tales of the actions of rogue trustees who wreak havoc on their institutions. This is a long-closeted issue in education—one that has not been thoroughly aired because of fears of retribution and because of the bad publicity associated with airing such problems in a public fashion. Finding themselves in uncharted territory, some leaders grow uncomfortable acknowledging the issue, much less placing it on a meeting agenda for discussion. But the problems associated with rogue trustees will not soon go away; in fact, the problems might be on the ascendency. As challenging and as uncomfortable as it might be, it is time to bring this issue into the national conversation.

That conversation has already begun in California and in Illinois in recent statewide meetings of trustees and presidents, at which the topic of rogue trustees was addressed in keynote sessions. But the conversation needs to be expanded to include other states and national meetings of trustees and other community college leaders. Impact on trustee citizen leaders who volunteer or are persuaded to run for

or be appointed to a position as a community college trustee do so with the best intentions. In a survey conducted for the Association of Community College Trustees (Smith, Piland, and Boggs 2001), the authors concluded that “The most important reasons that motivated both appointed and elected trustees to seek appointment or election were to: (1) serve the community; (2) serve the college; and (3) improve programs for students.” More than 6,500 trustees serve the nation’s community colleges. The overwhelming majority of these trustees are exceptional community leaders, elected and appointed to champion the community college mission for the community and students they represent. These local trustees serve the greater good, and as the guardians of their local community colleges they have helped create the most dynamic and innovative system of colleges in the world.

Occasionally, a trustee pursues a path other than serving for the greater good, and sometimes that trustee becomes a special challenge—a rogue, capable of creating enormous problems for other trustees, for faculty and staff, for the college CEO, and for the institution. Trustees want to champion the community college, and they want to have an impact on local education. As such, they are not often prepared for the machinations of a rogue trustee. As reported by community college presidents in my most recent survey and confirmed by conversations with a number of trustees, the rogue creates a climate of distrust and dissension among board members and between the board and the administration of the college.

Board meetings can be long and contentious, filled with emotion and anger. Presidents who responded to my survey described some of this behavior: “If he could destabilize the board and the president, then he could try and fill the void and gain control.” “He was out to destroy everyone, including the other trustees on the board.” “The rogue’s behavior caused severe conflict within the board, reduced the level of trust among members, and hindered efforts at team building within the board.” Presidents report that rogue trustees often bully or intimidate other trustees with verbal attacks in open and closed meetings. There are even reports of physical threats. A favorite tactic is to accuse the other trustees of being “in the pocket” or being a “rubber stamp” of the president. In some of these cases other trustees become reluctant to confront the rogue. As one president said: This particular rogue was so proficient, persistent, and aggressive in manipulating and disrupting to achieve her own agenda that the board became dysfunctional and was unwilling to take any action to stem her behavior.”

The ultimate impact of the rogue trustee on other trustees is that excellent and committed trustees resign or choose not to run for reelection. Presidents cited dozens of examples of trustees in this study who resigned or refused to run again because of the continuing challenge of dealing with a rogue trustee. He made board meetings so unnecessarily long and confrontational that after a year, two popular and productive board members resigned. The rogue trustee threatened to destroy the board chair, who later resigned.

Faculty and staff who have dedicated their lives to a college can also feel the impact of a rogue trustee. Though presidents make every attempt to protect faculty and staff from personal attacks by rogue trustees, they are not always successful. In some cases a specific staff member such as the vice-president for business or the director of personnel is a continuing target because of the special role he or she plays in the arena the rogue wishes to dominate. More common is the trustee who attacks any college employee who stands in his or her way.

Several presidents reported on these cases: “He used fear, and staff were afraid of his constant intimidation.” “When told by staff members that his request is against college policy, he sometimes bullies and berates employees to their face and to others.” A tactic used by rogue trustees to agitate the president or other trustees almost always falls on the shoulders of administrative staff requiring them to prepare detailed and endless reports on college functions and operations. The preparation of reports for board meetings is an expected and much-practiced activity in community colleges, but here we are describing behavior in which such requests are used as intimidation. In a number of the cases reported in our most recent study, the rogue trustee relishes the power and control he or she can exercise by requesting reports.

Where these personal attacks and intimidating actions occur, college faculty and staff become demoralized and cynical. They begin going through the motions. They lose heart, and the quality of their performance can deteriorate. Their relationship with the president suffers because they lose confidence in the ability of the president to manage the situation. Doubters often ask, “If the president cannot protect herself, how can she protect me?” Just as with other trustees, the ultimate damage occurs when faculty and staff lose their jobs as a result of rogue trustees. Some take early retirement or resign to take jobs in other institutions to disengage from the chaos created by the trustee and a deteriorating college environment. One key state leader reported that more vice presidents than presidents lose their jobs

because of rogue trustees. He suggested that vice presidents and other top administrators often became the sacrificial lambs to the rogue's need for power and vengeance. These administrators often are forced out when they cross a rogue trustee, and sometimes other trustees and the president are impotent to prevent it.

Presidents report personal attacks from rogue trustees that would shock those not exposed to such shenanigans. Rogue trustees have, on occasion, called college presidents incompetent, dishonest, stupid, and liars—in public places, including at board meetings, in community venues, and in meetings with groups of faculty and staff. In many of these cases, the assault is carried over into evaluations, contract extensions, and salary negotiations. Rogue trustees, through personal attacks and other means, create a climate that can undermine the authority and credibility of the president when the board is in chaos or when a trustee operates outside the norms of expected behavior without penalty.

When the trustee uses the local media or instigates an investigation by a grand jury, as reported in two cases in our study, the president's credibility suffers regardless of the speciousness of the charges and attacks. The ultimate price that a president pays as the result of a rogue trustee is the eventual loss of his or her job. In some cases, presidents are dismissed when the rogue can rally the other trustees to support such action. In other cases, the climate and the reputation of the college is so damaged by the rogue trustee that other trustees and even the president agree the situation is irreversible and that the president needs to be replaced. In most of the cases reported in this study, however, the president simply resigns in frustration.

It might be difficult for presidents who work with supportive boards and who have never experienced the impact or encountered the challenges of a rogue trustee to believe that, as one president said on our survey, "No president would be prepared for this kind of trustee." The following comments from presidents help validate this observation: "I had five great years until the new trustee came on board, and then I could not take it anymore and resigned." "My career was seriously damaged, and the buyout seriously damaged the finances of the college." "He ran me off and later ran off the second president. The third is beginning to realize the gravity of the situation."

The impact a rogue trustee can have on a college is enormous. While presidents are the most visible and vulnerable targets, administrators and faculty, too, can suffer, as can other trustees. Individuals, however, do have a choice, even though the damage can be severe, both personally and professionally. Administrators and

others affected by rogue trustees can move on and recover. The college, on the other hand, cannot leave the community and does not have the capacity to recover as easily as affected individuals; it is the college that suffers most at the hands of a rogue trustee.

When rogue trustees prevail the community begins to raise questions about the board's behavior and about the college's capacity to provide a quality education. A culture begins to emerge that makes it harder for the college to pass bonds, plan for mergers and expansion, develop new programs, and establish partnerships with local business and industry. In essence, the college becomes dysfunctional, with the responsibilities of the board, the president, and the administration confused, uncertain, and strained. The community at large has no trust in the board, no faith in its integrity, and no respect for the college. Once local stakeholders and community leaders lose faith in the college, the college's reputation is damaged almost beyond repair.

The rogue trustee can complete his or her tenure and leave the destruction behind, but the damage to the college can continue for years. One rogue trustee, unchecked over time, can turn a healthy college into a very unhealthy college. An early sign is decline in faculty and staff morale. The sense that the college was a special place in which to work no longer rallies loyalty. The bonds of community, collaboration, and connectivity are loosened and sometimes lost. Faculty and staff drift away and hunker down in the comfort of their personal priorities. The spirit of risk-taking, innovation, and experimentation is replaced by cautious behavior and paranoia. The climate created by the rogue trustee accentuates the conservative elements in the college, and there is a reluctance to launch new programs or to engage in change. Motivation to lead is inhibited; there are fewer and fewer applications from quality faculty and quality leaders; the college atrophies; students suffer collateral damage.

We enter uncharted territory when we engage the topic of the rogue trustee. The topic is a very prickly issue, and we do not have much experience in talking about it in public. The topic is emotional, and we are likely to feel awkward and uncomfortable as we share our views. It is, however, a very timely topic among a number of presidents, trustees, faculty, and staff—a topic that needs to be addressed. If we can begin to engage in a national conversation about the rogue trustee—the elephant in the room in many community college board meetings—we will reflect an emerging maturity of our movement as an institution that can

address these difficult problems. And, if we can risk this conversation, we might set an example for four-year colleges and universities and for the K–12 education sector, where the problem is epidemic. More important, we need this conversation so that we can openly explore the strategies that successful colleges have created to address the problem of the rogue trustee—strategies documented and described in our study. We owe it to the overwhelming majority of our excellent trustees and to the extraordinary presidents, faculty, and staff who guide our institutions to begin this conversation and resolve the challenges so they can better do their jobs. Our colleges and our students need this conversation to begin today. A copy of the full report is available from Terry O'Banion at obanion@league.org.

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References

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