

In Defense of Curmudgeons

The majority of campus curmudgeons care about improving their institutions, writes Terry O'Banion. College leaders need to learn to listen to these concerned curmudgeons.

By [Terry O'Banion](#)

April 3, 2015

Curmudgeons prosper in every sector of higher education. And every seasoned faculty member and administrator can identify at least one curmudgeon at their institution.

I recently conducted a study on this group, based on survey responses from 77 community college presidents. The study's starting point was to define the campus curmudgeon in negative terms, because ultimately we were interested in their negative impact on colleagues and colleges. When I started reporting on the results of the study and began listening to the feedback from self-identified curmudgeons, though, I learned some valuable lessons about curmudgeons and their potential in helping our colleges improve.

In the original survey, the following definition was created with assistance from 14 national community college leaders:

Every community college has a curmudgeon; most colleges have more than one. They are highly visible on campus and can be identified easily by faculty, staff and administrators. 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.

Using this definition, the study found that:

- Ninety-seven percent of the respondents indicated they had known a curmudgeon who fits the definition in the study. Fifty-eight percent indicated that the curmudgeons they had known were male, while 2.5 percent said they knew female curmudgeons. However, 38 percent of respondents indicated men and women were equally represented.
- Full-time faculty members were identified by 82 percent of the respondents as the primary group representing curmudgeons.
- Twenty-seven percent of the respondents who selected faculty indicated humanities/arts as the most representative disciplines of curmudgeons, and 27 percent selected social science. These two areas represent 54 percent of all curmudgeons in the study.
- Eighty-six percent of the respondents indicated that the impact of curmudgeons on the college was either negative (49.3 percent) or highly negative (36.3 percent).

In addition to surveying the characteristics of curmudgeons, the study also asked presidents to describe the behaviors, motivations, damage caused and strategies used to mitigate the damage created by curmudgeons. Details on this part of the study are reported in a monograph, *Community College Curmudgeons: Barriers to Change*, which is available [here](#).

The views of curmudgeons on leaders and their behaviors take on increased meaning when they speak for themselves, as they do in the italicized quotes below.

Curmudgeons Have a Point

Some curmudgeons distrust leaders who are constantly introducing the next big thing. It is not uncommon for some leaders -- especially presidents -- to always be chasing the flavor of the month or the innovation du jour. Whether this behavior is motivated by self-aggrandizement or by the desire to improve the college to better serve students, the behavior is viewed by some curmudgeons as negative, time-consuming and costly.

What if curmudgeon is simply another word for not ready to get breathlessly enthusiastic for the current flavor of the month!

I am proud to be one of those curmudgeons mentioned in this article. During the past 10-plus years, I have lived through layer upon layer of the Next Big Thing foisted upon faculty by an administration consisting of layer upon layer of folk who have never set foot in any classroom in a faculty role.

When my institution is among the first to adopt whatever latest snake oil is being peddled by Gates, Lumina, et al., over the objections of experienced faculty and in the face of any and all plain common sense that should tell us to run the other way, it is my duty to my students and to the taxpayers who fund this school to be that curmudgeon. If that hurts the feelings of Mr. O Banion et al., too damned bad -- somebody has to say it when the emperor has no clothes, and I'm happy to be the one to do so.

The comments also reveal frustration with or disdain for administrators who have not been in the classroom or who do not understand the challenges classroom faculty face. Leaders who do not understand the very difficult challenges of teaching in a community college and who launch new initiatives without taking those challenges into consideration contribute to initiative fatigue and failure.

I take real pride in my role as a curmudgeon and sometimes introduce myself as our campus curmudgeon. I believe in the importance of separation of powers and checks and balances. When administrators know they're going to be asked to explain themselves and the reasons behind their initiatives, they are at least a little more prone to stopping and seeing things through the eyes of those upon whom they're foisting them. I realize that from an administrator's point of view, we gadflies seem like pains in the butt, but as we know, power does tend to corrupt, and any sort of friction to slow this process down is worth hanging onto.

Some curmudgeons have been given a raw deal. Curmudgeons are not shy folk and speak out on many issues. Some do so because they have something important to contribute to the college conversation; some do so because they want to be visible to leaders who might support their aspirations to become a leader. If they take positions outside the comfort zone of the president or other leaders, or if they are not members of the internal network of leaders, they are often treated as outcasts. Their only choice to be heard or visible may be to become a curmudgeon. The following quotes from presidents in this study support these observations:

Curmudgeons should never be confused with whiners. It is easy to mistake their independence for hostility or simple negativism. Yet they can be reliable friends and forceful allies.

Our biggest curmudgeon on campus (nearly everyone can name him), has often ended up in leadership roles (such as chair of the faculty council). A few years back I had the opportunity to speak with him one-on-one about a topic, and during that conversation he shared with me that he had been at the college for nearly seven years and during that time he had reported to seven different supervisors with a different person conducting his performance evaluation each year. I believe that lack of

effective leadership for these individuals is a key contributing factor to their behavior or should at least be considered.

Some curmudgeons identify problems that some leaders do not want to address. There are many challenging issues in the contemporary community college and many points of view on how these issues should be addressed. Leaders have their plates full in addressing the most pressing problems, but curmudgeons often identify problems that lurk under the surface and that influence campus culture. While leaders may sometimes dismiss these problems as gripes from a disaffected group, the issues, nevertheless, exist for those who are willing to register their concerns. For example, leaders in general accept the reality that many community college students are underprepared and very challenging. When some faculty complain about having to deal with the toughest tasks of higher education (as Frank Newman identified the challenge many years ago), they are met with some disdain and accusations they do not support the open-door philosophy. Instead of covering over these differences, leaders should make them more visible by listening to faculty concerns.

Here are some quotes from concerned faculty members who responded to the presentation on curmudgeons at the League for Innovation in the Community College's recent conference in Boston:

Maybe if they'd listen to us curmudgeons once in a while, rather than trying to shut us up, community colleges wouldn't be in the shape many of us are today: taking unconscionable amounts of students' loan eligibility and seeing them leave when it runs out, as illiterate/innumerate as they were when they got here. No one wants us to talk about that, though.

I get so tired of administrators, who seldom step foot in a classroom, dissing faculty for resisting change. As soon as I question the notion that more technology in the classroom is the solution to every problem in higher education, their eyes glaze over and they stop listening.

Hey, I have initiative fatigue! I'm an adjunct who's worn to a snot by administrators who keep coming up with crappy time-wasting boondoggles that add to my workload but not my paycheck.

Curmudgeons of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but bloated levels of directors, deans and deanlets whose understanding of education is limited to the marketing techniques of an M.B.A. and who lie supine and servile at the feet of the corporate interests, which are committed only to churning out indebted graduates with employability skill sets.

These comments come from only a few who responded to the reports, but they are spirited and are probably only the tip of the iceberg of how many faculty, including those who are curmudgeons, really feel about some of the issues facing community colleges. These comments touch only briefly on such key issues as student loans, student failure, technology as a silver bullet, adjunct faculty, overemphasis on career and technical education, colleges as bureaucracies, not listening to faculty, and tension between faculty and management. What would this list include if disgruntled and concerned faculty were honestly asked to identify the issues and challenges they would like to see addressed in the open? And what might be the outcomes of improved communication and problem solving if leaders and faculty were to engage in an open conversation about some of the challenges that are seldom addressed in a rational way?

What I Have Learned About Curmudgeons

In the sections above, I have tried to reflect points of view of a few curmudgeons regarding issues they care about. In summary, I have learned that some curmudgeons:

1. Have legitimate and rational responses to perceived injustices and incompetent leadership.
2. Have become cynical because of broken promises and constant changes in leadership.
3. Have been passed over for promotions and recognition they deserved.
4. Are very knowledgeable of college issues, policies and programs and are very articulate about sharing that knowledge.
5. Would like to see improvement and change in the college and because of resistance from leaders and others have become more aggressive and belligerent as the only strategies open to them.

In education we do not like to give up on our students -- and maybe on our curmudgeons. If we could find a constructive way to engage curmudgeons directly, we might open up new ways to involve them, with more positive results for everyone. Not every curmudgeon, of course, wants to engage in such conversations; some really are destructive and want to do everything they can to slow and block change.

Fortunately, this group is a small minority. The great majority of faculty, joined by concerned curmudgeons who care, can have a very positive impact on a college and its students. Leaders need to learn to listen to the concerned curmudgeons and to hear what they are really saying over the static of the spirited language they sometimes use to vent their frustrations and their passions.

Bio

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