

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

HOW TO GET RID OF A ROGUE TRUSTEE



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In my 2009 study, *The Rogue Trustee: The Elephant in the Room*, I surveyed and interviewed 59 community college presidents from across the nation who had dealt with a rogue trustee. Most had dealt with more than one; and one president had dealt with five. Here is the definition I asked the presidents to use as they responded to my questions:

Rogue trustees run roughshod over the norms and standards of behavior expected of public officials appointed or elected to office. They tend to trample over the ideas and cautions of the CEO, the trustee chair, and member trustees. They place their own interests over the interests of the college. They violate written and unwritten codes of conduct. They often make inappropriate alliances with faculty, staff, and other trustees. They recommend and support policies that are not in the best interests of the institution. They consume an inordinate amount of staff and meeting time. They know how to get attention, appeal to the base elements in others, and manipulate individuals and situations to their advantage. Most rogue trustees are quite bright and articulate; some are mentally unbalanced. They are sometimes loners, exiled from the herd, but they also create alliances with others to carry out their agenda. They are high maintenance. 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.

As I discovered in my research, there are hundreds of rogue trustees operating in community colleges; it is the rare president who has not had to deal with one. I also discovered there are very few or no regulations to get rid of a rogue trustee.

In my study on the rogue trustee concerned presidents made clear that holding trustees accountable was a major challenge. A California president said, "There is no recourse in California that I was ever able to find to stem the actions of a board member who is up to no good—unless of course, they are engaging in illegal activity." A Michigan president noted that "state law severely limits the actions that can be taken against an elected official." Unfortunately, recent reports in the press indicate rogue trustees may be on the rise.

So, How Does a College Get Rid of a Rogue Trustee?

Getting rid of a rogue trustee is not an easy task. A rogue trustee can violate all the norms of good behavior and become a resident curmudgeon, attacking colleagues at will, disturbing meetings, spreading rumors, and creating havoc without ever being confronted or chastised. Disgusted by such behavior, some trustees resign or do not run again. Presidents sometimes move on to other positions. And the rogue trustee can become a fixture for years and years.

It would be helpful if there were qualifications for the position of a



STEPS TO DEAL WITH ROGUE TRUSTEES

Even though presidents believe it is the responsibility of the board as a whole or the board chair to deal with a rogue trustee, the president has a vested interest in the issue and becomes a significant player with the board and the board chair. Working together, these key stakeholders can take some of the following actions to get rid of a rogue trustee:

VOTES OF NO CONFIDENCE

The board as a whole can take a vote of no confidence in the rogue trustee and share that information with the employees of the college, the press, and the voters in the local community. Votes of no confidence by the faculty have forced presidents to resign in numerous cases; such votes by one's colleagues on the board may have the same effect. If faculty engage in a vote of no confidence of a trustee, that becomes a powerful message to resign.



HIGHLIGHT THE DAMAGING BEHAVIOR

The damaging behavior of a rogue trustee is regularly on display. Making sure that college employees and community members see that behavior is a powerful tool to leverage pressure on a rogue trustee to resign. The board could agree to televise all but closed sessions and make those sessions available to college employees and members of the community.

ENCOURAGE JOURNALISTS TO INVESTIGATE

Encourage journalists to investigate. Journalists from local newspapers should be encouraged to attend board meetings and investigate the actions of rogue trustees. Education journalists representing national journals and magazines can be contacted about problems with rogue trustees. Student journalists for the local college newspaper can be encouraged to investigate and report on rogue trustees.



APPEAL TO ACCREDITING COMMISSIONS

Reported in the national press more than a decade ago, the Maricopa Community Colleges in Phoenix, Arizona, is a case study in which the Higher Learning Commission was notified anonymously about the damage created by a rogue trustee. As an outcome of the appeal, the chancellor was invited by the Commission to take some action. He asked for a review by a group of external educators whose report provided leverage for the chancellor to engage consultants who specialize in dealing with board problems to work with the board in a series of interviews and workshops.

MOUNT RECALL CAMPAIGNS

In some cases, faculty members have collaborated with citizen groups to mount a recall campaign against a rogue trustee. Even students can play a key role in recall campaigns. As reported in The Desert Sun on May 21, 2009, "Residents of a rural community near Yosemite National Park have overwhelmingly voted to recall all five members of the local school board after a group of high school students launched a campaign to unseat them."



FIELD AN OPPOSING CANDIDATE

Leaders astute enough to mount a recall campaign also have the skills and abilities to field an opposing candidate. Identifying and supporting an opposition candidate may be less messy than mounting a recall campaign, although many of the same political elements are involved.

member of a college board that could be shared with voters and those who appoint trustees, but qualifications for public office of almost any kind, including the president of the United States, are not the norm. Leaders in a college try to fill the gap by creating codes of ethics and guidelines for board behavior, but a rogue trustee will ignore these. Rogue trustees understand that if even impeachment is not sufficient to remove a U.S. president from office, there is room for behavior that violates the norm.

In a survey conducted by the League for Innovation in the Community College in October 2009, of 556-member community college CEOs, 74 presidents responded to a series of questions regarding the rogue trustee. (The return rate was 13 percent, which is the typical return rate for this quarterly survey of these CEOs.) Asked to designate who had primary responsibility for dealing with a rogue trustee, 46 percent indicated the board as a whole; 43 percent identified the board chair; only 3 percent listed the president.

Some of these suggestions are hardball strategies that must be weighed against the overall damage that can accrue to the college from local and national publicity about a problem that most would like to handle in the confines of the college community. Several outstanding community colleges in the nation have suffered a loss of

reputation when the machinations of a rogue trustee have been reported in the press, when the accrediting commission has been called in, or when recall and election campaigns take center stage. College leaders should try to mitigate these outcomes as best they can and design strategies that do not garner such publicity; but, in the final analysis, short-term negative publicity may be less important than long-term gain in unseating a rogue trustee.

Rogue trustees have done enormous damage to many community colleges. They have made it impossible for other trustees to serve, and they have made it impossible for presidents to continue their leadership. Rogue trustees impact the culture of the college and can destroy the spirit of a community college for years, crushing the morale of the faculty and making it difficult for all employees to apply to other colleges because of the reputation the college has earned. Quality candidates for the presidency and for other positions in the college become suspicious and reluctant to apply.

If a college is cursed with a rogue trustee, leaders from the college and the community must take every possible step to get rid of the rogue trustee or pay the price. In the end, it is the students who will pay the price, and as educators and concerned citizens this cannot be allowed to happen.

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