

TRUSTEES AS REFORMERS, MAVERICKS, RENEGADES, AND ROGUES

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Terry U. O'Banion

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All kinds of trustees serve the nation's community colleges. Some—such as the reformer, the maverick, the renegade, and the rogue—are more distinct than the others. They all have in common high visibility on the board and in the college. They are all high maintenance for the president and the chair of the board. They all have considerable impact on the college and the way the board operates. But beyond these key elements they have very little in common.

Reformers. The reformer trustee usually operates from altruistic motives with one overarching purpose—to make changes in the college for the better. The reformer trustee has an agenda to make college operations more efficient, to improve communications between the president and the board or between the faculty and the administration, to shore up the financial operations, to help the college better serve the community, or to make sure the college is exploring and adding new programs and services to better serve students. To achieve his or her goals, the reformer trustee works within the norms and behaviors expected of public or elected officials and makes every attempt to work with the administration and the faculty, with other trustees, and with community leaders. The reformer trustee is well respected by college stakeholders and usually becomes a visible and powerful leader championing the college. Sometimes impatient with the slow progress of change in the educational enterprise, the reformer may create friction and challenges as her or his reform agenda is herded through institutional pastures.

Mavericks. The maverick trustee marches to the beat of his or her own drum—a beat that does not always sound a clear purpose and whose tune may not be recognizable by other colleagues. The maverick usually operates on a motive to be different, to be contrary against the main flow of the stream. The maverick’s purpose can be altruistic or egotistic—goals are flexible; the means remain the same and identify the maverick as a person who acts on an agenda that is often counter to the agenda of others. Maverick trustees are very unpredictable. They might today support the agenda of the reformer and tomorrow vote against the same agenda. They might chafe under the policies and guidelines of sound board behavior, but they do not make it a practice to violate the standards and norms set by the board for effective governance. Except for the core commitment to being the odd person out, the maverick can be a loose cannon counted on sometimes to fight the good fight with other board members and sometimes to aim the artillery directly at the board and the college.

Renegades. Renegade trustees fall between the mavericks and the rogues. They do little to improve board communications and to work as a member of the team. They are more comfortable operating at the edge of the group of which they are a member, sometimes acting as the resident critic or curmudgeon, sometimes making surprise attempts to ameliorate an impasse. As renegades they are as likely to desert a cause as join one. Their purpose is unclear; sometimes like the maverick they appear to march to their own drum and behave just to be different; sometimes like the rogue they appear to advocate an agenda destructive to the college. They cannot be counted on for support or for leadership.

Rogues. 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 self-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, to appeal to the base elements in others, and to 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 can cause enormous damage. In short, they tend to poison the culture of the college; instead of helping create a sense of community, collaboration, innovation, and common values, they become the catalyst for increased defensiveness, paranoia, subterfuge, and fear. The rogue trustee is the elephant in the room, creating an ever-widening circle of frustration and destruction for anything in his or her path. (O’Banion, 2009, p. 8)

Outsider Trustees

Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of community college trustees are exceptional community leaders, elected and appointed to champion the community college mission for the community and students they represent. These local trustees, serving as the guardians

of their local community colleges, have helped create the most dynamic and innovative system of colleges in the world. As George Potter, long-time board member at Jackson Community College in Michigan and past chair of the Association of Community College Trustees has said, “It would be rare indeed to find a more important or more difficult role, carried out by more dedicated, selfless public servants, than that of a governing board member of a community college” (Cited in Mellow and Heelan, 2008, p. 84).

Unfortunately, this majority of “dedicated, selfless public servants” sometimes has to deal with a maverick, renegade, or rogue trustee bent on stirring up trouble that can be deeply damaging to the college, the students, the faculty and staff, and the community. Let’s call them the “Outsider Trustees.” (Reformer trustees usually operate from altruistic motives and respect reasoned discourse.)

The first stakeholders to identify and to feel the brunt of the Outsider Trustees are the college president, chair of the trustee board, and/or other members of the board. And they are also the key leaders who are responsible for monitoring and curtailing the destructive behaviors of these outsiders. All effective boards will have long ago created and approved a Code of Ethics for trustees; established a required continuing trustee development program; approved a system for annual evaluations of the CEO, trustee chair, and members of the board; and adopted written policies and guidelines regarding the role of trustees. Some colleges have developed special statements of values, principles, and practices for trustees. Accrediting standards also address the appropriate roles of governing boards.

Sometimes, however, these documents can be too general in addressing the destructive behavior of Outsider Trustees. Policies and guidelines that address more specific behaviors regarding the functions of board members and responsibilities during board meetings may be more useful. For example, there are a few simple policies regarding responsibilities of board members during board meetings that thoughtful leaders will put in place before they have to deal with an Outsider Trustee:

- Place time limits on speaking during board meetings.
- Establish attendance requirements for board meetings.
- Require that staff reports requested by board members be prepared only when two or more board members make a request.
- Agree not to respond to anonymous letters and emails.
- Agree that the president and the board chair will share all their communication from and to individual board members with all members—except in very special cases.
- Prohibit trustees from making direct requests or demands to staff; all requests should be made through the president or the board chair.
- Establish processes for a consent agenda.
- Establish criteria and a process for removing a board member from office.

Specific policies and guidelines such as these will help create an environment of trust and open communication that can lead to a more collaborative and supportive culture for the entire college community. And these kinds of policies and guidelines will help prevent

damaging intrusions from maverick, renegade, and rogue trustees during board meetings and perhaps in other aspects of their work for the college. If these kinds of policies and guidelines cannot be implemented or even discussed because of the current climate of board relations at the college then current leaders have no recourse but to play hard ball and resort to strategies and actions that are likely to be very disruptive and even very destructive to the college, the faculty and staff, students, and the community. In such a scenario there are no winners.

References

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Terry U. O'Banion is Chair, Graduate Faculty, National American University, and President Emeritus, League for Innovation in the Community College.

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