

Memo to a Rogue Trustee

Terry O'Banion

If you are a rogue trustee, you are not an ordinary trustee. You stand apart from the other members of the board and are easily identified by all the key players who have a major stake in the college. Check the definition of a rogue trustee at the end of this brief to see if this description in any way fits your behavior. If it does then you are a challenge for your colleagues, and they have already tried all the usual advice about how to get you to be an effective member of the board: attend conferences and workshops, abide by the college policies, participate as a member of the team, observe the legal controls, etc. Sometimes this advice works; in most cases of rogue trustees it does not. A different approach might just jar loose something to encourage behavior more appropriate for an appointed or elected official—more appropriate for serving the community as an advocate and champion of the community college. Maybe the following questions will stir something inside you to step back and examine what you are doing as a trustee.

Questions on the Professional Level:

To what extent does your behavior cause stress and difficulty for the faculty and staff at the college, including the president?

To what extent does your behavior cause stress and difficulty for the other trustees on the board, including the board chair?

To what extent does your behavior cause stress and difficulty for the college as a whole, including the students?

On an A – F scale what grade would you give yourself in achieving your goals as a trustee at the college?

Do you have ambitions for public service following the end of your service as a trustee? If so, how will your reputation as a trustee support your plans?

Questions on the Personal Level:

Do you enjoy being a trustee?

How do the members of your family feel about the way you conduct yourself on the board?

How do you handle the stress usually associated with a person who is the odd person out?

Do the rewards, whatever they might be, for being a rogue trustee trump the rewards of a trustee who makes a contribution recognized as valuable by key stakeholders?

When you retire from service on the board how do you want to be remembered for your contribution?

Your colleagues do not want to silence your critical analysis of key issues. They do not want you to be a “rubber stamp” of the president or the board chair. They do not ask that you vote so the count can be unanimous. They want you to be an effective member of the common trust board members of community colleges hold in common. It is a sacred trust not to be held lightly. By your election or appointment, you have been entrusted by others to work for the greater good—of the students, the college, the community. You are a “trustee” not a rogue who runs roughshod over the norms and standards of behavior expected of public officials. Maybe these questions will be helpful in calling you back to the core values expressed in your oath of office to serve and champion the community college. There is no greater or more important service than to be one of the key leaders we ask to hold in trust the future of our students.

Defining the Rogue Trustee

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, 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 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. The rogue trustee is the elephant in the room, creating an ever-widening circle of frustration and destruction for anything in its path.

Terry O'Banion *The Rogue Trustee: The Elephant in the Room* (Spring 2010)
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