

Community College Curmudgeons

BARRIERS TO CHANGE

TERRY O'BANION

Foreword by John E. Roueche and Suanne D. Roueche



A joint publication of The Roueche Graduate Center at National American University and the League for Innovation in the Community College

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Foreword

Given our own first response when invited to dive into this study of curmudgeons and, further, to provide some opening statements, we assumed we would not at all be surprised about why a wide audience of readers would be equally attracted to sitting down to digest findings from a study about curmudgeons, especially their behaviors relative to their presence in community colleges. As well, we expected that readers would approach the very first pages of this study quite familiar with the subject, either from direct experience or reputation; suspected that they would find few surprises in these pages and would likely identify with the majority of the findings; and looked forward to the conclusions relative to recommendations for combatting the relatively standard characteristics of curmudgeonhood. And we found all of the above by an author who has consistently taken on some of the stickier issues with which community colleges have struggled, and must, as they step up to meet the challenges that many of us would currently refer to as extraordinarily demanding times.

Without doubt, there will be few, if any, readers who will come to this good read about another sticky, but familiar, subject without shared experiences, without having known, at some level and to some extent, one or more individuals who well meet the collective definition that the survey responders helped the author craft. It is unlikely that there is anyone in this galaxy who has not a smidgen of prior knowledge about what readers will find as major themes and common threads among the responses provided by community college presidents to the author's survey. They may even be somewhat comforted by the discovery that there are recommendations for dealing with the outward behaviors of resident curmudgeons, and less comforted by a lesson learned—that there is no cure for this condition. However, they will discover that while stripes on these tigers will most likely remain unchanged over time, there are some relatively common strategies to make them less noticeable and somewhat less destructive, perhaps even putting their behaviors to good use. While none of these recommendations for amelioration or improved comfort levels were cited as being extraordinarily successful, most appeared to have been worth the

effort to combat them one way or another. And, we found that the majority of these recommendations are best practices for leaders in any situations; they just happen to be especially important when curmudgeons threaten to stifle some of the life out of the important work of the college.

It would be fair to say that one person's curmudgeon may not be another's—there appear to be wide variations along the continuums of intensity and effectiveness, from resident terrorist to resident grumbler. But whatever the general perception of the resident curmudgeons, it is safe to say that they do not go unnoticed.

It would be fair to say that curmudgeons have a role to play and that they do it so frequently that their responses—typically negative or contrarian—are often neutralized because everyone anticipates the worst, and they are usually not surprised to get it! Their “wherever you are (often the president in this study) or whatever you are for, I am not” positions are expected, and so frequently can put others in the planning mode for responding to the challenges and reactions that curmudgeons bring to the table or to civil discourse anywhere.

On that note, it is also fair to say that while curmudgeons may make us uncomfortable and guarded, they may be providing everyone some level of useful service, especially in reminding us that we do not always have to be, without fail, absolutely right about everything. If politics (a major underpinning of most every enterprise, especially alive and well in higher education) can be defined as a human enterprise that relies strongly on the fine art of negotiation and compromise for progress, then we can get a different understanding of the curmudgeon's role. Just as there are multiple perceptions of reality, there are (most likely) multiple responses and resolutions to every issue or problem. Of course, individuals who agree with none of them other than their own, may well be curmudgeons by design, intending to be the thorn in the side and the fly in the ointment. However, disagreeing and disagreements do not curmudgeons make, nor should they brand as curmudgeons those

who choose to disagree in the process of reasonable, civil discussion. Of course, as this study confirms, if disagreement is a consistent pattern across all discussion continuums and topics, the stripes are earned.

Finally, responding to the behaviors of resident curmudgeons makes us more mindful of preventing their growth across the institution, and the recommendations certainly provide some sound strategies for doing that. They need not grow like topsy. Moreover, there are some preemptive strikes that presidents and other hiring authorities can make to avoid adding to their numbers. A consistent theme in that regard, applicable to all organizations and to community colleges going forward: Hiring is job one! Of critical importance is getting a firm grasp on and a clear picture of a potential hire's basic philosophical perspectives on the especially critical work, and goals, of the organization—for example, the mission and role of the college; the roles of administrators and teachers; expectations relative to performance and goal(s) achievement; and the like—all of those important pieces of the college's organizational train and in this case, the engines that pull it (or not). No doubt, a clearer insight into individual personhood (and the roles and responsibilities potential hires see themselves playing and fulfilling) could expose potential curmudgeonhood. It appears from this study and our own experiences that dyed-in-the-wool curmudgeons cannot help but display contrarian traits if asked the appropriate questions, similar to faculty hiring strategies that require walking the talk, e.g., teaching a class while potential peers, administrators, and/or students are the engaged audience with the assignment of evaluating the performance. Individuals looking to be hired typically can describe acceptable, and often extraordinary, abilities to perform, relate, engage, and collaborate, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Eating early on is wise, prior to the decision. Rarely can individuals demonstrate or explain those things that they do not do normally or have not ever done.

As Dr. O'Banion suggests early on, perhaps there are more lovable curmudgeon types out there; and some of us have had our share of curmudgeon relationships with family members or long-time friendships that, fortunately, rarely provided grist for the curmudgeon's mill. He suggests that an exploration of these types

may be better reserved for another study. However, we couldn't resist considering what one might find in such a study and suggest that perhaps, even in this one, there are individuals who, despite some of their most egregious behaviors, are truly useful to the organization. It would also be fair to say that, although not among the major themes identified by survey respondents, but possibly just below the surface of curmudgeon behavior, is a relatively positive characteristic: an innate need to help others clarify their thinking.

One lovable curmudgeon in our family, Uncle Bob, enjoyed taking the contrary view of any issue. Sometimes he played to what everyone knew were his political or religious beliefs. However, he had established himself as charming and fun loving, talented and thoughtful, even as he always had another view of the world than yours. As very young children, we learned to have our information ducks in a row before our mouths were engaged; that is, we knew in any conversation with Uncle Bob, during which we might express an opinion, that opinion would not go unchallenged. In fact, we must admit that it sharpened our thinking prior to engagement or it made us run for the hills to avoid what we knew was coming, especially when we were not absolutely certain that we would win, or we simply were not interested in jousting.

Our experience with Uncle Bob has at its foundation the need to develop successful, rational responses to individual behaviors that appear to have an eternal life of their own. It is a sticky issue that should not go away and about which future conversations may well identify and generate ever-better thinking about our organizational health. Perhaps the most useful outcome of this study will be to create more interest in determining exactly how our colleges' health is affected by curmudgeonistic behaviors. All of which will lead colleges to engage everyone in conversations to identify where the train leaves the tracks, where otherwise and possibly former committed, valuable contributors to the college lost their sense of positive purpose were reminded of the old adage: Before you can teach Johnny algebra, you must know Johnny. Until colleges take action to learn more about their resident curmudgeons, about what brought them to

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earn negative reputations, and about how they might positively engage them again, they will likely never know about strategies and structures that could create future generations of like-minded individuals. How extraordinary would it be to take this approach—improving institutional health by engaging in courageous conversations with those who reportedly often threaten it the most?

This is a study worth a serious read and a topic deserving further and much more in-depth investigation. We highly recommend both. Moreover, we commend Dr. O'Banion's persistence in turning over some of our organizational rocks, peering beneath them, and shedding compelling, useful light on what

he finds there. His engagement with this subject that encouraged the community colleges presidents in this study to join in the conversation will encourage the reader to become equally engaged, as well.

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October 2014

Community College Curmudgeons

Curmudgeons seem to be a timeless phenomenon in society, a reality perhaps best, if paradoxically, demonstrated by their prevalence in fiction. From Ebenezer Scrooge and Grumpy the Dwarf to Archie Bunker and the eponymous characters created by Andy Rooney and Lewis Black, curmudgeons can be spiteful, annoying, mean spirited, funny, or even loveable. Curmudgeons are so ubiquitous there is an International Society of Curmudgeons at www.grumpy-people.com.

Curmudgeons are well represented in every kind of American institution, including religious organizations, government, corporations, foundations, hospitals, and unions. They are particularly visible in the world of education which may provide a fertile crucible for the production of curmudgeons.

In any case, curmudgeons prosper in every sector of the educational enterprise, and every seasoned faculty member and administrator can identify at least one curmudgeon they have known. This article reports on a two-part study of community college president's perceptions of curmudgeons they have known and their impact on change and innovation.

DEFINITION OF CURMUDGEONS

To better understand the curmudgeons in community colleges the author, with assistance from fourteen national community college leaders, created a definition of curmudgeons. Participants in this process were asked to focus on the negative characteristics of curmudgeons because we were ultimately interested in their negative impact on colleagues and colleges. A case can be made for affable and even well-meaning curmudgeons, but that is a project for another time.

After numerous iterations, the following definition was accepted as the definition that would guide this study:

In my experience, curmudgeons at their best are amusing distractions and only kill time. At their worst, they are deadly idea killers and deadly killers of others' self-esteem and productivity.

Almost 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.

While this definition guided the study, many participants felt compelled to share their own definitions which reflect various attributes of the curmudgeon. The following four definitions are examples of many submitted. All statements throughout this article in italics are the actual statements of the respondents.

A Texas community college president:
In my experience, curmudgeons at their best are amusing distractions and only kill time. At their worst, they are deadly idea killers and deadly killers of others' self-esteem and productivity.

A retired superintendent/president from a California community college: *Curmudgeons can serve as one of the barriers to innovation and change; they too often contribute to an atmosphere of institutional pessimism, for they are critics of new ideas. As they are defenders of the status quo, they function as obstructionists. Sometimes they are articulate critics of any attractive/new ideas and enjoy scuttling them. On all too many of our campuses, they wield a great deal of negative power and are the perpetrators of the "we/they" "us/them" culture. As inhibitors of change, they can be toxic to advancing any new initiative.*

A retired president from an Illinois community college: *A curmudgeon is ill tempered and stubborn and opposed to just about anything. In other words – negative. Negativity is magnetic; it is a force bordering on absolute evil. And, it compels people. They are attracted to it. They laugh when someone puts another down. They smile at a cheap shot. They can't help it. They are attracted to negative forces until positive forces counteract. But positive forces often cannot blunt the negative forces of curmudgeons; they always survive and continue to poison the atmosphere.*

A president from a Florida community college: *A curmudgeon is a person who thinks otherwise.*

PHASE ONE: LOGISTICS AND FINDINGS

In the fall of 2013, a survey, created by the author, was distributed to 375 League Alliance member community college presidents to determine presidential perspectives on community college issues. Seventy-seven presidents responded to the initial survey for a return rate of 20.5 percent, which is average for similar surveys by the League.

To gain a general understanding of the number, gender, discipline affiliations, and impact of curmudgeons, as perceived by presidents, six questions were asked of this initial group of 77 participants with space provided for additional comments. The following summaries constitute Phase One of the study.

Number of curmudgeons. Ninety-seven percent of the respondents indicated they had worked at a community college that had a curmudgeon who reflected the study definition. Asked how many curmudgeons they had known, 29 percent indicated from 1 to 3; 32 percent indicated from 4 to 6; 18 percent indicated from 7 to 9; and 18 percent indicated 10 or more. Even though a return rate of 20.5 percent is low for some studies, and even though those who returned the survey may reflect a bias that differs from those who did not return the survey, the impression from these data suggests that many community college presidents are well acquainted with curmudgeons. Ninety-seven percent indicated they had known a curmudgeon, and 18 percent had known 10 or more.

Comments from the respondents provided further insight about the numbers:

They are everywhere!

Rarely more than 3 who were real “destroyers.”

I call them resident Nazis!

We just consolidated with another institution, and some of the old timers can't accept it so we have a lot of curmudgeons.

True curmudgeons have been rare in my experience but prominent in my memory.

Gender of curmudgeons. Asked the gender of the curmudgeons they had known, the presidents indicated 58 percent had been male and 2.5 percent had been female. However, 38 percent indicated that men and women were equally represented in curmudgeons they had known. Clearly, in this study men are more likely to be perceived as curmudgeons than women. There were only a few comments in response to this question, but two were quite interesting:

Females have been the most ugly in public; males operate more behind the scene.

This seems to be an equal opportunity position.

Employee classification of curmudgeons. Eight categories were provided for respondents to identify the employee group in which most of the curmudgeons they had known were members: classified staff, executive administrators, mid-level management, full-time faculty, part-time faculty, student services, students, and trustees. Full-time faculty was selected by 82 percent of the respondents. Mid-level management was selected by 6.4 percent, trustees by 3.8 percent, and students by 2.5 percent. Full-time faculty are the primary source of curmudgeons as perceived by the presidents in this study. Only one person identified part-time faculty as the group most representative of curmudgeons.

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It must be pointed out, however, that even though presidents perceived more curmudgeons among faculty than among other groups of employees, the actual number of curmudgeons on a campus at any one time is quite small. The great majority of faculty and other employees on a college campus are deeply committed to student learning and success and to working in an environment in which collaboration, civility, and respect frame the culture of the organization. A curmudgeon or two on a campus have more impact than their numbers warrant—another reason to study them.

Comments about the categories of curmudgeons provide additional insights. Union membership was not a category, but some respondents noted union affiliation as a category that should have been included:

The curmudgeon is institutionalized through the faculty union, but I only say this for unionized environments; in non-union environments it is often the mid-level managers.

The majority I have known were/are faculty union representatives, but my current system head qualifies as do many state system officers.

Community members involved in our partnerships are also sometimes the curmudgeons.

Trustees can be curmudgeons and often create disciples among vice presidents and professional and classified staff who feel protected by the trustee.

It is really one each for three categories: mid-manager, faculty, and counseling.

Discipline affiliation of curmudgeons. The 82 percent who identified full-time faculty as the group most represented by curmudgeons were also asked to identify the primary discipline of these curmudgeons from a list of nine options. Both Humanities/Arts and Social Science were selected by 27 percent of the respondents as the discipline areas most representative

of curmudgeons; 54 percent of all curmudgeons come from these two areas. Other was selected by 16 percent, Career and Technical Education by 6 percent, and Mathematics by 5 percent. Health Services and Library Services were selected by 2.5 percent each, and Community Services and Student Services were not selected by any of the respondents. The respondents were asked to select which discipline represents the *primary* affiliation, which limited their opportunity to rank disciplines.

Comments about discipline affiliations added a bit more nuance, with a number of respondents pointing out that other factors are more important than discipline affiliation in identifying curmudgeons:

This is not a disciplinary characteristic but an individual one. It is usually a veteran faculty member, tenured or quite senior.

...the actual number of curmudgeons on a campus at any one time is quite small.

Curmudgeons come from all walks of life and disciplines.

Retired faculty are sometimes curmudgeons.

Business faculty, or those who have operated their own business, tend to produce the most curmudgeons. They focus on different topics than those from the humanities and social sciences.

Humanities and social science faculty tend to have more than their share of curmudgeons. Incidentally, litigation in higher education involves these two areas more than the others.

Social science is followed closely by English faculty and librarians.

They come from all disciplines; however, their outlook on life, and their personality and temperaments, are all very similar.

Impact on the college. Of the 77 survey respondents, 86 percent indicated impact on the college of curmudgeons they had known was either negative

(49.3 percent) or highly negative (36.3 percent). Keep in mind that we, by definition, were looking only at negative curmudgeons so it is not too surprising that presidents would judge their impact on the college to be negative. Two respondents judged their impact to be positive and one respondent highly positive.

Respondents providing comments seemed to struggle to explain their answers. Some held very strong feelings about the toxicity of curmudgeons while others felt they were not taken very seriously by the faculty:

Curmudgeons create much damage. Presidents and vice presidents, as well as faculty and staff, have often left because of them — sometimes our best, not close to retirement.

The curmudgeons I know gained power and influence by playing into others' worst fears about senior administrative decisions. Their influence was very disruptive; they did not speak the truth but were very difficult to counter.

These folks are toxic; they can manipulate opinions and cause a tremendous amount of toxicity in a culture if not actively and assertively managed.

Although most I know feel they make highly positive contributions by telling it like it is, they create enormous havoc by dominating every college meeting with their personal and undocumented anecdotes which they turn into generalizations with which they browbeat the junior or part-time faculty. They stunt our growth.

The revered academic exchange of ideas and academic freedom for all are trampled by curmudgeons.

On the other hand:

Squeaky wheels get attention because they can be annoying.

A significant number of full-time faculty simply ignore them, but since most of these faculty do not want to take on the hassles of being a union officer, the curmudgeons are left in place to do their damage.

Most faculty have become amused and expect their behavior so their effect is rather neutral.

As we created a positive campus culture and climate, the curmudgeons were increasingly marginalized. They became the examples of what others did not want to be.

PHASE ONE: SUMMARY

In summary, Phase One of this study tells us that:

- Ninety-seven percent of the respondents indicated they had known a curmudgeon who fits the definition in the study. Eighteen percent indicated they had known ten or more.
- Fifty-eight percent indicated that the curmudgeons they had known were male and 2.5 percent female. However, 38 percent of respondents indicated males and females 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 had selected faculty selected Humanities/ Arts, and 27 percent selected Social Science as the most representative disciplines of curmudgeons. These two areas represent 54 percent of all curmudgeons identified by respondents in this 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).

The revered academic exchange of ideas and academic freedom for all are trampled by curmudgeons.

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There are curmudgeons in almost all community colleges. In this study the majority are male, full-time faculty, from the Humanities and Fine Arts or Social Sciences, and cause enormous damage to the college.

PHASE TWO: LOGISTICS AND FINDINGS

In Phase Two, the 77 respondents who completed the brief survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up to address issues of motivation, behavior, impact, and strategies used to mitigate behavior and impact. Forty-five, or 58 percent, of the respondents indicated their willingness to respond to written questions. Almost half of those (49 percent) actually provided written responses. The 22 written responses to four key questions reflect a rich, but limited, data source on which the findings in Phase Two are based. Participating presidents were asked to respond in writing to the following four questions/items:

1. Describe the primary actions and behaviors that characterize a curmudgeon.
2. In your view, what is the primary motivation for these actions and behaviors?
3. What kind of damage did the curmudgeon(s) create for you, for others, and/or for the college?
4. What kind of actions or strategies did you or others take to change or moderate the behavior of the curmudgeon(s)?

Respondents were instructed to use the definition of a curmudgeon in the study in answering these questions and were further instructed to focus on one specific curmudgeon or a compilation of the curmudgeons they had known. They were also asked not to identify themselves, their colleges, or anyone involved to ensure confidentiality.

The author read all responses for each question/item a minimum of three times, highlighting recurring themes and specific statements that reflected those themes.

Because of the small number of written responses and the informal process used to organize the themes, readers should be cautious about generalizing the findings. It is best to think of this study as a first-impressions review of a controversial topic that, as far as we can tell, has never been studied in the community college sector. As such, this study may serve as a catalyst to encourage more rigorous examination of an important issue.

The major themes reflected in the answers to the four questions/items are summarized in the following sections: behaviors, motivations, damage, and strategies used to moderate behavior. Selected statements from the respondents, highlighted in italics, further illustrate the themes.

BEHAVIORS OF CURMUDGEONS

CAVE people was how one respondent described curmudgeons—Colleagues Against Virtually Everything. His description of CAVE people captures the essential core of a curmudgeon:

On any given subject, they are right and you are wrong. No matter the topic, the evidence, or the documentation, their position prevails, and rational discussion is simply not possible. Moral outrage and righteous indignation are the tools of the day, and there is no openness to opinions and ideas different from theirs. They will proclaim their position and opposition to anyone who will listen, and if they are unable to prevail with an intellectual argument, they will resort to personal attacks. Motives, intentions, and occasionally character and ancestry, are called into question by curmudgeons when others dare to oppose them.

A number of respondents echoed this same theme about the behavior of curmudgeons:

In my experience, regardless of the issue, a curmudgeon takes the most extremist position. Nothing is ever enough. All change is perceived as negative and disrupts the culture as defined by the past. The person is usually the most vocal and looks

to other curmudgeons to support his or her actions. They always try to block progress by using the filibuster – just like congress. They will talk until they are blue in the face as a way of making us give up. Even if we don't give up, they use talking as a way of slowing down progress. They never talk about what will succeed, but will refer to one person or one example where something did not work as a reason not to change.

Curmudgeons with whom I have worked at different colleges share common characteristics. They seek the spotlight to air their differences of opinion or grievances. They appear to gain satisfaction from disrupting or delaying important decisions with which they do not agree.

The word “negative” was the most frequently used word to describe the behavior of curmudgeons, as indicated in these sample statements:

Their motives are most often centered on self and approached from a negative aspect.

They just want attention, even if it is negative.

Curmudgeons are negative in their approach to solving issues.

They are constant negative complainers.

They are negative and nonproductive from everyone's perspective.

Essentially, curmudgeons display various negative behaviors designed to draw attention to themselves and their positions, and to distract others from the mission of the college.

Resistant to change was also one of the top characteristics respondents used to describe the actions and behaviors of curmudgeons. This characteristic reflects both motivation

and behavior, and is included in the sections on motivation and behavior in this report. Respondents felt that curmudgeons tended to live in the past and had difficulty adjusting to changes in educational philosophy and practice. Two stories shared by respondents illustrate examples of resistance.

The story may be apocryphal, but one president shared an event he said happened to a new president he knew. The new president wanted to connect with faculty and remarked to one of the older members, “Harry, I bet you have seen a lot of changes at this college since you have been here.” Harry replied, “I sure have, and I have been against every damned one of them.”

They object to every new initiative because they oppose all change from the status quo.

The president of another college related a story about changes in facilities and new technology. The college had spent many millions on renovation and had added millions more in new classroom technology and technology infrastructure. With these updates, the college had state-of-the-art presentation stations with computer access, internet access, DVD and CD players, and document cameras in every classroom and laboratory. As the renovation was completed, the resident curmudgeon requested an overhead projector so he could continue to use the overheads he had developed over many years. The president noted, “He is still complaining that we forced him to change his teaching style.”

Respondents commented on the resistance to change as a major behavioral factor in curmudgeons:

They object to every new initiative because they oppose all change from the status quo.

They grieve everything that can be grieved to halt change.

There is constant yearning for some bygone era in which they felt more comfortable.

They just like to block change.

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The president's gadfly was a major theme cited by respondents—not surprising since the respondents were all presidents, but also not surprising because a fundamental characteristic of curmudgeons is their propensity to confront authority. In the community college, the target can be anyone in charge (e.g., deans, vice presidents, committee chairs, faculty senate presidents), but the president is the most visible and the most often attacked target of curmudgeons. Most of the behaviors reported by presidents had to do with how curmudgeons perceived the president's actions or behaved toward them.

They have a great desire to "stand up to the man."

Curmudgeons are almost always negative, but especially so in public. In private they might be friendly and sometimes even agreeable. But you never can trust them because they will stab you in the back and throw you under the bus. In public meetings, they will find a way to ask a question that no answer can satisfy. The purpose of this behavior is usually to put you in your place and remind you who really has power in the organization. Typically, curmudgeons are long-term employees who believe they will outlast any administrator (and they are usually correct). They are usually faculty and have tenure. This is their turf and you are simply a visitor.

They are the ones who, when faced with the facts, still do not believe anything the administration is saying. Some have been downright vicious, caring only about tearing down the organization rather than building it up. They complain that the leaders do not communicate.

The curmudgeon never misses a campus or faculty senate meeting and is well informed about what is going on around the campus, but constantly points out the lack of communication and transparency from the administration.

When not making a direct attack against the president's character or integrity, the curmudgeon

will constantly drop insidious gossip and state inaccurate information and events he is hearing from all the campus "chatter and noise going on out there." There are never any specifics.

The curmudgeon in our college browbeats the president and board members when there is not a public audience. He goes out of his way to be pleasant in public, but seems to actually enjoy inflicting emotional pain upon those he targets.

In summary, curmudgeons can be organized into three key groups: those who are virtually against everything, those who are resistant to change, and those who play the gadfly to the president. From this brief review, it is also possible to identify some of the primary tactics used by curmudgeons:

1. Curmudgeons often use humor and sarcasm as weapons.
2. Intimidation is a primary tool of curmudgeons.
3. Curmudgeons are often aggressive and belligerent with anyone who disagrees with them.
4. Faced with new initiatives, curmudgeons like to point out past failures (e.g., "We tried that before and it did not work.").
5. Curmudgeons use body language (eye-rolling, quizzical looks, and shoulder shrugs) to make their points.
6. Curmudgeons are smug and surly and almost always negative.
7. Curmudgeons move with ease between rational and irrational positions.
8. Curmudgeons are unwilling to listen to alternative viewpoints.
9. Curmudgeons are often disruptive when others are making a point.
10. Curmudgeons are usually rude, condescending, patronizing, and unprofessional.
11. Curmudgeons like to push the buttons of others.
12. Curmudgeons are the ultimate contrarians.
13. Curmudgeons are bullies.

An additional common tactic of curmudgeons is that they sometimes use students as a shield and rationale for their behaviors. They like to present themselves as the protectors of students, as the defenders of students against an uncaring administration and wrong-headed colleagues.

They hide behind “I am doing this for the students.”

They often advance their arguments under the guise of “We know what’s best for our students.” Their most frequent argument is that whatever new idea is being proposed will be detrimental to students.

MOTIVATIONS OF CURMUDGEONS

What motivates a curmudgeon to express the behaviors described in the previous section? Such a simple question; such a complex answer. Motivation is a tricky concept, hard to pin down and almost impossible to verify. It is often quite difficult for us to understand our own motivations, much less the motivations of others. Observed behavior is one clue most often used; we bundle the behavior we see into a pattern and infer cause or motivation. Behavior is the visible application of motivation. However, we can never be 100 percent certain that we have identified and described motivation accurately, and neither can trained psychologists and sociologists because it is all so individual and so messy. Motivation cannot be seen in the same way a tumor can be seen with an MRI, although recent breakthroughs regarding increased responses in the brain to stimuli that result in measurable indicators is promising. And there is the problem of projecting our own values (and motivations) onto the behaviors observed in others—especially those with whom we have a special connection, positive or negative. So when we categorize and examine and label the motivations of others, we do so with caution and need to be reminded that we are slogging through a swamp full of dark holes and unseen traps (O’Banion, 2009, p. 33).

Readers should carefully weigh whether presidents are describing the motivations of curmudgeons or whether they are projecting their own insecurities.

Nevertheless, the presidents in this study, after they had described the primary actions and behaviors of curmudgeons, readily responded to the question: In your view, what is the primary motivation for these actions and behaviors?

Fear of change was cited as one of the primary motivations behind the behavior of curmudgeons. Fear of change is quite different than motivations cited below, such as need for power, insecurity and need for attention, and feelings of superiority. These motivations reflect inner needs often based in childhood deprivations or character disorders—and fear of change could have its genesis in similar inner needs. But fear of change is also a handy way for presidents who advocate change to describe resistance to their programs and initiatives. Readers should carefully weigh whether presidents are describing the motivations of curmudgeons or whether they are projecting their own insecurities. Nevertheless, presidents did cite fear of change quite often as the motivating force behind the behavior of curmudgeons:

Fear of change presented as unwillingness to cooperate or collaborate.

These are folks who do not like change. Anything that is a departure from the routine causes them stress, and then the curmudgeon behaviors show up.

We had one curmudgeon throw an absolute fit because she wanted to keep the antiquated phone system she knew how to use.

It is just fear of change.

Change is scary for this individual, and anything to maintain the status quo makes him happy. His tactic for slowing any progress is to question the reason for a new activity and to point out that the new idea lacks clarity. He likes to make the point that the new proposal is an answer looking for a question.

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Do not move my cheese is the motivation of curmudgeons. They are averse to change of any type whether it benefits them or not. They are set in their ways, and any change will disrupt their personal space.

A true curmudgeon is against almost anything that is new or innovative.

They thrive on turmoil and drama and seem to believe that disruption is a great tool for holding change at bay.

Fear of change may be an exaggerated way of describing a motivation that is nothing more than resistance to changing what has become comfortable. Many faculty have become comfortable with syllabi and teaching strategies that have worked for many years. Many administrators have become comfortable with the policy manuals and program guides they created years ago to address new changes in the college. Many presidents have become comfortable with their leadership styles honed in a previous college and in previous decades. In this sense, it is possible that most human beings fear change when it requires them to give up what has become comfortable. That kind of fear of change may need to be addressed in a very different way than the more deep-seated and neurotic fear related to change that has become a cliché in the educational enterprise.

In this study, several presidents seemed to want to identify some explanation for the fear of change they used to characterize curmudgeons. These observations ranged from resistance based on more work to suggestions of laziness:

They are unwilling to expend the time and energy required to learn a new process or do something different, particularly when there is a perception that it might require additional effort on their part.

In truth, I believe they are afraid of the work that new ideas and new methods require. They are

generally lazy individuals and have learned how easy it is to find fault with just about everyone and thus avoid real work.

Some are burned out, regretful, and bitter—especially as their careers are dragging on longer than their enthusiasm. Others are actually angry that they haven't the influence and respect they believe they have earned and instead express their opinions in exaggerated terms to get attention. Some have been left behind and lack the energy to even try and catch up.

Several respondents painted a different picture of the motivation behind a curmudgeon. One tactful respondent explained that, *Sometimes curmudgeons appear to behave badly simply because their personalities are different; other responses were less diplomatic, e.g., Some folks are congenitally nuts.*

These are vivid descriptions by some respondents of some curmudgeons and add a flavor of how strongly some presidents feel about curmudgeons with whom they have to deal.

Need for power also emerged as one of the primary motivating forces for curmudgeons from the perspective of the presidents in this study. One of the presidents related this story:

I remember early on at the college I took a young faculty member out to lunch to talk with her and perhaps do some coaching. She was very bright and had some early leadership characteristics, but she was always negative and always anti-administration. I believed that she had the ability to become a president someday if she changed her behaviors. She told me she would not change because the negativity was "the source of her power." She felt rewarded when people told her how brave she was and when faculty came to her with problems because they knew she was not afraid to speak out.

A number of presidents cited the need for power as a source of motivation:

Their goal is to preserve their power base and to be seen as the advocate for their constituent group.

Because they did not feel sufficiently valued by leadership, they sought to create their own value on campus by creating for themselves a power base among their colleagues.

They have achieved a power base by their actions (formal or informal), and they do not want to give it up or share it in any way.

It is all about power and control.

Power appears to be the ultimate goal. They want to be perceived as a leader with followers.

There are many reasons behind the need for power hinted at by some of these respondents, but that analysis is far beyond the scope of this study. One interesting aspect here is that curmudgeons will pursue power even when that power is based on negative and even destructive behaviors. In that regard, some community college educators are no different than some well-known members of Congress. In two professions where the original motivation is assumed to be based on doing good for others, it is disturbing to find a number who actually relish making things worse for others.

Curmudgeons are insecure and need attention was also a major theme these presidents referenced as a motivating force.

I have a BS in Psychology and a Master's degree in Counseling, and it seems to me curmudgeons lack in self-confidence. Because of their likely ineptitude, they try and deflect anyone looking at their abilities knowing what people would find. Instead, they put up smoke screens about inane issues to try and hide their deficiencies – sadly.

A deep sense of disappointment and frustration with their own lack of achievement or when others do not readily accept their ideas.

Need for attention is the driving motivation.

In my opinion, they want to feel valued and important and believe that what they have to say has merit and should be taken seriously. It becomes a cycle when they see the behavior gets them the attention they want and no one will confront them so they get away with it.

I believe it is a deep-seated need and desire for attention, whether that attention, is positive or not.

Many people are insecure and most of us need attention, but healthy human beings generally find ways to deal with their insecurities and need for attention in positive ways. Some leaders have tried to work with curmudgeons by providing opportunities for leadership as committee chairs and project leaders, and have invited them into the inner circles of leadership, but in my own experience as an administrator in three different community colleges, the value of this kind of intervention was quite mixed and mostly unproductive. Along with their insecurities and need for attention, curmudgeons have often developed a need for power and a negative persona that does not allow for collaboration and civility. Several respondents shared stories of how they had helped curmudgeons become more positive and professional.

In addition to the motivations identified above, some respondents suggested that “feelings of superiority” and “just for the sport of it” qualified as motivating forces. And two respondents wrote many pages of case studies involving revenge, family, governors, ex-spouses, girlfriends, and former presidents and staff to explain motivations. Curmudgeons apparently are the nexus for some very complex and convoluted relationships on a few community college campuses – at least several presidents feel strongly that is the case.

DAMAGE CREATED BY CURMUDGEONS

Only one respondent in this study felt that curmudgeons did no damage: “I don’t see damage, although some untimely curmudgeon comments may have touched a nerve here and there and left some ill will.” This president stands alone, for all others in

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Phase Two of this study reported considerable damage with numerous examples. Of the 77 respondents in Phase One of this study, 86 percent indicated that the impact of curmudgeons had been either negative (49.3 percent) or highly negative (36.3 percent).

The damage reported here is grouped around the kinds of damage curmudgeons create, as perceived by the presidents who provided written responses. The categories overlap a bit, which reinforces the idea that taken together the damage is a powerful force that can destabilize a college, its staff, and its leaders. An individual curmudgeon, acting up now and then, may not do a great deal of damage if the college is fairly healthy, but sustained battering by a curmudgeon or a number of curmudgeons over a period of time on a variety of issues can do great damage since their goal, as one president said, is to “derail, deflect, and destroy.”

Slows or stops change was one of the major ways that curmudgeons impact their institutions, according to respondents. One president provided a summary of that kind of damage:

In my experience, curmudgeons have undermined institutional efforts to implement innovative programs to better serve students, to improve operational processes, to cultivate better relationships with the outside community, and to apply successfully for grants.

Slowing down the pace of change emerged as a key issue for many of the presidents:

When curmudgeons are campus fixtures, the change process takes much longer than it would normally.

They slow the rate of change and adaptation within the organization and often have a highly negative impact on institutional morale.

They slow down decision-making processes and also waste a lot of time because of the need to respond to accusations and positions that are largely indefensible.

Some initiatives took longer than they should have because of having to deal with the curmudgeon. Some initiatives simply stalled out.

In short, everything takes longer, the effort is more intensive, frustration rates are higher, and the potential for damage to the institution is greater when you have to work around the disruption created by the curmudgeons.

Creates an unhealthy environment on the campus was another category of damage identified by responding presidents. Some presidents reported this in general terms as cited below:

Curmudgeons create hostile and unhealthy work environments.

Ultimately, they created an unhealthy culture within our institution that has just in recent years been repaired – after the curmudgeons retired.

As a member of our board, he has totally changed the dynamics and positive atmosphere and direction of the board, and the college.

They can literally be a thorn in the side of the institution for years.

Every faculty and staff member (except perhaps the curmudgeons) prefers to work in an institution where the culture is cordial and collaborative—where the work environment is healthy. And all excellent leaders strive to build foundations, policies, and networks to support a healthy environment. Many colleges have created value statements and expectations featuring the characteristics of a healthy climate, and these become guidelines for professional development programs and for behavior in committees, departments, and in campus communication of all kinds. Healthy campus climates can be easily identified by consultants, visitors, and members of accrediting teams; unhealthy campus climates are equally easy to identify. The next two categories of damage are specific examples of how curmudgeons contribute to the creation of an unhealthy or hostile work environment.

Undermines mutual respect and trust was cited by respondents as one of the tactics curmudgeons use to create an unhealthy campus climate. Creating a climate in which those involved have mutual respect and trust in others is one of the cornerstones of healthy work environments. Curmudgeons may not have a specific goal to create an unhealthy environment, but their actions of undermining others and sowing the seeds of mistrust certainly lead to that outcome.

Curmudgeons damage relationships by undermining mutual respect and trust. Too often they respond inappropriately, thinking that two wrongs make a right. They divert attention from focusing on positive outcomes by engaging leaders in word battles, procedural disputes, and other negative activities that require extensive engagement.

They create an atmosphere of mistrust and ill will. They don't come with solutions; they come with antagonism and anti-everything attitudes.

They tend to intimidate new faculty or less vocal faculty, creating situations where many are afraid to speak out.

Curmudgeons love to create and spread rumors of administrative shenanigans by "telling it like it really is," which encourages mistrust.

They started many rumors, most of them untruths or partial truths that were almost impossible to counter. They were able to convince many others that college leaders did not care about faculty and staff, leading to significant morale issues on campus. Because the two curmudgeons were friends, but with different spheres of influence (one faculty and one administrator), I was amazed at the level of disinformation they spread and chaos they were able to create.

Creates adversarial relationships is another tactic closely related to the undermining of mutual respect and trust. Again, curmudgeons may not have a goal of creating a collegewide unhealthy climate, but they play a major role in creating adversarial relationships on campus which lead to an unhealthy climate. They are often champions

of the "we-they" syndrome in which they try to pit the administration against the faculty or the board against the president. They become particularly powerful in this role when they are elected to positions of faculty leadership. One president reported that curmudgeons had created a dysfunctional administration by requiring every college decision to be approved or denied by the Academic Senate, which eventually resulted in sanctions and probation by the regional accrediting agency on consecutive comprehensive site visits.

They create an adversarial environment which encourages people to take sides.

They created a divide among employees because everyone naturally begins to choose sides.

They seriously impacted our college in terms of people feeling free to speak their minds. Our faculty senate meeting became one that no one wanted to attend because of their outbursts. No one felt comfortable in confronting them because no one was sure how far they would go.

Curmudgeons routinely are so nasty to others that people are afraid of confronting them, so their negative actions serve as a constant and insidious cancer eating away at legitimate efforts to improve the institution.

They disrupt meetings and cause dissension among those who are trying to keep an open mind and understand why change may be needed. There is a long-standing fear in our college about attending meetings because of prior attacks from curmudgeons. Many of our staff will not engage in a discussion in meetings for fear of being attacked.

Whether curmudgeons create adversarial relationships between various groups in the college or between themselves and others, collateral damage can affect the college in significant ways. As the statements above indicate, adversarial relationships can lead to situations in which faculty and staff are reluctant to confront the curmudgeons or even to engage them in conversations for fear of being attacked. No one likes to participate in that kind of hostile environment. But as noted in

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these statements, in some situations faculty and staff will not even attend meetings because of the behavior of curmudgeons. This is a very sad situation given that the educational world is the first bastion of free speech. In previous sections of this report, a number of respondents identified curmudgeons as “bullies.” To the extent they curtail free speech, they can also be identified as “tyrants.”

In addition to the four areas of damage briefly noted in the section above, respondents identified two other areas less frequently but nevertheless important to consider in assessing the damage they cause. Several presidents referenced the enormous amount of time they have to devote to dealing with curmudgeons—some on a daily basis—and the time it takes to clean up after them. They are not easy and take an inordinate amount of time, and ultimately that takes valuable time away from more important issues. Presidents and other leaders have to check rumors, correct information, and generally reassure constituents that the sky is not falling.

More important perhaps is the damage done to the college when curmudgeons take their vitriol directly to the community.

They are more than happy to take their disagreements into the community and publicly express their displeasure about what is happening in the college, the direction it is moving, and the intentions of those leading the change. Since people in the community view these spokespersons as responsible individuals in a position of influence, the negative comments are taken at face value, and the public impression/image of the college suffers needlessly. I find it particularly troubling that the curmudgeons are, on occasion, perfectly willing to damage the institution or the reputations of people within the institution in order to assert their position that they are right and everyone else is wrong.

My colleagues and I were continually embarrassed by his communications to the press and to others about the college.

They carry their attacks into the community and apologize to no one for doing so.

In summary, curmudgeons can create significant damage to a college. Presidents are primarily concerned about the extent to which they slow or stop change and progress and the extent to which they contribute to an unhealthy work environment. Negative work environments emerge when curmudgeons use tactics to undermine mutual respect and trust and create adversarial relationships between groups or between themselves and others. Their actions also contribute to unnecessary work for the president and other leaders on issues that keep them from more important work. The extent to which curmudgeons take their issues to the community and the amount of damage these actions create, however, is perhaps one of the most important findings from this study and one that is in need of detailed further examination.

Dealing with curmudgeons is tricky...

STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE DAMAGE CREATED BY CURMUDGEONS

Dealing with curmudgeons is tricky is a statement from one president that sums up the challenge. Respondents in this study did not agree on one best strategy; they agreed only that dealing with curmudgeons was time-consuming and daunting work that often did not result in positive outcomes.

Most respondents framed their dilemmas in terms of whether they should connect personally with curmudgeons to appeal to their better nature or try and isolate them from doing more damage. Neither option is a sure thing.

Connect personally is a strategy that a few presidents have used effectively. Two presidents describe their approach:

My personal experience has taught me that curmudgeons do not become what they are overnight, and I cannot change them quickly. I have worked with some over a period of years to earn their trust and respect through meticulous attention to detail and consistent behavior that aligns with what

I say. Someone has to be the adult, and when I have chosen that role, I usually win them over by demonstrating respect for their position and earning their trust by following through on what I promised.

Where I thought they could be embraced and brought into civil discourse, I have cultivated relationships, sought their take on issues, asked them to be involved in the decision-making process, and respected their view. In other cases, I have tried to engage them as persons without engaging their behavior. I can love and respect their personhood even if I disagree strongly with some of their opinions or manner of communicating them. Even with the worst curmudgeons, however, I have sought some form of contact and relationship. In many cases, after a relationship has been formed, I have had success in asking them to moderate their behavior and contribute more thoughtfully, noting that the college could handle dissenting views if they could handle civil public discourse.

Unfortunately, more presidents indicated they tried to connect personally but failed to do so. One president explains what he tried to do:

I have tried many actions over the years. I have tried to engage curmudgeons by giving them leadership positions, thinking they are truly frustrated in their current jobs. I have tried to meet one-on-one only to have the content of our conversations ridiculed and spread across the campus. I have seen groups walk on eggshells and bend over backwards to make the dissenter happy. Some of our faculty members often try to agree with the curmudgeons to get them to be more agreeable. Nothing I or others have tried works because curmudgeons do not want to help; they only want to disrupt and destroy.

Other presidents are quite succinct in their views about the outcomes of connecting personally:

I initially listen to the curmudgeons in hope of getting them to work with us, but the approach usually fails.

I do my best to anticipate his accusations and tactics, but the effort meets with little success. His browbeating strategy trumps my attempt to express accurate and valid viewpoints because he refuses to acknowledge my views, or anyone's views, if they refute his comments.

I am not sure it's possible to become friends with this person or to build a trusting relationship.

I haven't been able to change the behavior, but I have had some success in neutralizing it.

Nothing I or others have tried works because curmudgeons do not want to help; they only want to disrupt and destroy.

Presidents and other educational leaders, by their very nature, are committed to making personal connections with various constituencies. Sound leadership is based on how well leaders can engage with followers to create a collaborative culture. Curmudgeons present a special challenge to the values of leaders, and almost all leaders are inclined to try and win over those who position themselves outside the leader's circle of influence. When these attempts at connection fail, seasoned presidents often turn to the tactic of isolating the curmudgeons.

Isolate the curmudgeons is a strategy recommended by many who have dealt with curmudgeons. This is a strategy of last resort—something like placing a prisoner in solitary confinement. Some presidents were quite blunt:

Isolate them as much as possible via physical relocation or limiting access to others.

Try to isolate the individuals as much as possible.

Isolation can mean a number of things when it comes to curmudgeons. One president isolated a curmudgeon by focusing on his disruptive and unprofessional behavior and its impact on students and the college as a reason for dismissal, and another rallied faculty to take a stand, which helped isolate the curmudgeon.

Some curmudgeons with whom I have worked could not be reasoned with, and they had to be disciplined for their disruptive and unprofessional behavior. In

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those cases, we made sure we had all the appropriate policies and procedures in place, linked them to the mission and values of the institution, provided training, and enforced sanctions for violations according to negotiated agreements, college policies, and college procedures. I recall one case that took five years to resolve; eventually, the curmudgeon decided to retire just as our attorney said I could “pull the trigger.” The key in such situations is to focus on the detrimental effects of the curmudgeon’s behavior on students and the college’s mission. The failure to maintain that focus risks extended litigation.

As our faculty began to take ownership and embrace the initiatives and projects we agreed on together, they started to tell our story across the college and throughout the community. While the curmudgeons kept the rumor mills working, more and more faculty began to publicly correct the misinformation. The result has been the isolation of the curmudgeons, limiting their ability to negatively impact the discussions and deliberations in the institution.

Connect with the curmudgeons or isolate them? Connecting is a lot of work that does not often pay dividends, but presidents probably feel better for trying. Isolating curmudgeons is also a lot of work and does not always prove effective. Presidents who have to make a choice between these two strategies should carefully assess their own abilities and values—especially if they choose to connect personally. They should also carefully assess the personality and behaviors of the curmudgeon under question as well as the kind of support they can expect from the faculty, administrators, and board of trustees for whichever option they decide to pursue. The choice may be a false dichotomy; the following strategies may provide better choices for the president and other leaders in their efforts to mitigate or moderate the destructive actions of curmudgeons.

As our faculty began to take ownership and embrace the initiatives and projects we agreed on together, they started to tell our story across the college and throughout the community. While the curmudgeons kept the rumor mills working, more and more faculty began to publicly correct the misinformation.

Create an inclusive culture is, of course, one of the primary goals of a good leader and also a successful strategy in dealing with the machinations of curmudgeons. And, it is much less reactive than trying to isolate or directly change the behavior of curmudgeons. One president outlined an approach that is the beginning foundation for institutional transformation rather than a strategy for addressing the challenges of curmudgeons, but he recognized the approach as accomplishing both purposes.

Build capacity and perspective by investing heavily in professional development for employees at all levels. The development activities should be designed to engage employees in best practices that support student success. The goal is to introduce them to new perspectives, new ideas, and new approaches. It also helps our faculty and staff understand that things can be done differently and that change can benefit students and faculty alike. I involve those who are willing to grow professionally and who can recognize potential and opportunity for institutional growth; and I support their efforts while also planting some ideas for future consideration.

Create structures for ideas and activities to come from any level within the organization. It is easy for curmudgeons to attack an idea as “The President’s Initiative” in an effort to kill it. When the idea comes from within and is generated by their peers and colleagues, they have a much more difficult time opposing it.

One structure working well for us is a Planning Council that includes representatives from faculty, staff, and administration to ensure that every voice is heard.

Two presidents described structures of inclusiveness they thought quite effective in moderating the negative influence of curmudgeons:

The most effective thing I did was to place our two resident curmudgeons on the college’s Higher Learning Commission AQIP team. The team

consisted of eight senior leaders and the two curmudgeons who formulated the Action Plans, prepared the Systems Portfolio updates, and reported to faculty on progress. Both of the curmudgeons spoke about the AQIP work at in-service meetings of their colleagues as part of their responsibility to the team effort. As members of the team, they began to understand how decisions were made and began to support administrative decisions because they were part of many of them. Their involvement did not completely change their curmudgeonly behavior, but it did help tamp down their most strident actions.

I joined a college as a new president where decisions were made by a governing body that originally included both faculty and administrators. Over the years before my arrival, the administrative leadership had eroded its relationship with the faculty. A couple of curmudgeons from the faculty had emerged in leadership roles within the union and the governing body. By the time I arrived, the situation had deteriorated to the point that the faculty members would not allow the administrators to meet with them because they felt the administration was trying to overwhelm the governing body with administrative members. The governing group of faculty kept a task list because they also felt they could not trust administrators to follow through on anything; the task list was supposedly designed to keep administrators honest and accountable. Over a two-year period I worked with both faculty and administrators to show that the administration would follow through on tasks and responsibilities. I also started an incremental process to show faculty that deans could be a useful resource in carrying out the work of the governing body. When the faculty raised an issue that was in a specific dean's area of responsibility we tabled the discussion until I could consult with the dean and get back to the faculty with an answer. Soon, the faculty saw the value of inviting the dean to the meeting so that we could all communicate directly. By the third year we had no need for the task list (which had been mostly a punitive "gotcha" tool), and all the deans participated

Transparency and truth are the best weapons to fight off a curmudgeon. The best antiseptic for a lie is to shine a light on it.

in meetings. A few years later we instituted a series of meetings prior to the meetings of the full governing body where selected faculty and administrative leaders could meet to resolve issues on the agenda and come to the full group with recommendations. This was a much more efficient arrangement for our work, and it also led to greater trust and respect between faculty and administrators.

As part of creating an inclusive culture and structures to involve all voices, several presidents also advised "kill them with data" and "Use verifiable data to support claims." As the movement to create a culture of evidence

has spread throughout community colleges over the last fifteen years, I am not sure that the movement's champions realized the value of using data as a defensive weapon in the battle with curmudgeons – but it helps.

In this study, presidents tended to use two specific strategies to create a culture of inclusiveness. Ensuring transparency in all college business and "running for the green lights" by investing in the

innovators and change agents were crucial elements in creating a culture of inclusiveness where all voices could be heard.

Ensure transparency was recommended by a number of the presidents in this study, and some shared examples of how they did that.

Transparency and truth are the best weapons to fight off a curmudgeon. The best antiseptic for a lie is to shine a light on it.

If you open the organization to support engagement from all employees, you must also be willing to create transparency and broadly share information on the activities and initiatives under discussion, the reasons the college is undertaking the initiatives, and the anticipated goals the initiatives are designed to address. The more transparent you can make the organization, the less credibility curmudgeons will have.

At one college in which I served as president, the curmudgeon was a member of the board of trustees.

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To confront his destructive actions I shared every communication and request from any one trustee with all trustees. The trustees were quick to recognize and repudiate the actions and behaviors of the curmudgeon once exposed, and they actually directed him to cease and desist. Through this experience they became more aware of their roles and responsibilities as board members, and learned better how to work with other trustees and me in creating policy. Ironically, a trustee curmudgeon's bad behavior was a catalyst in making a good board an even better board.

Invest in the change agents was a strategy also recommended by presidents as one way to create a culture of inclusiveness. The message of inclusiveness encourages all to participate and contribute, but change agents and innovators are the ones who get the support and the resources, and that sends an important message across the campus. Presidents had specific advice about this strategy.

Invest heavily in those employees who are supporters of innovation and change through promotions, special assignments, and professional development. And invest significant resources in extensive new employee orientation and mentoring so that they are acculturated to the college climate you are trying to create.

With persistence and resolve to offer much needed professional development, we found the mechanisms to incentivize faculty to participate in college initiatives. Once some of the senior faculty came on board, it was easier for others to follow.

Use the 90-10 rule. If less than 10% are not participating in an initiative, ignore them. Then create activities and incentives so exciting the 10% will wish they had joined the effort.

In summary, there are numerous strategies presidents and other leaders can use to mitigate the impact of curmudgeons. Strategies should be determined by the extent they are applicable to the personalities of the president and the curmudgeon, by the existing culture of the institution, and by the resources of the institution. In this study, some presidents suggested that if they could

connect personally with a curmudgeon, they could change behavior; but just as many presidents reported that strategy as a failure because of the unchanging personalities of curmudgeons. The alternative proposed by other presidents was to isolate curmudgeons, but that, too, has its limits. The most positive strategy was for leaders to create an inclusive culture across the college. Creating such a culture is a hallmark of effective leaders and excellent colleges because it engages all members as collaborators. In addition to making a college more efficient and effective, an inclusive culture also works to diminish the influence of curmudgeons. Leaders also advised that investing in change agents and innovators and creating structures and policies to ensure transparency were important elements in creating a culture of inclusiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this study, presidents echoed a common theme when they shared their perceptions about the behaviors and motivations of curmudgeons and the damage they caused to the institution and for those who worked within the institution: Curmudgeons are barriers to the change and innovation which are necessary conditions for a healthy community college. Change is the monster under the bed for curmudgeons. Curmudgeons slow change, resist change, and fear change as indicated in the following statements:

Slow Change

They slow the rate of change and adaptation within the organization and have an often highly negative impact on institutional morale.

Sometimes their actions slow down the change.

They delay and stop change. They stunt our growth.

They slow the process of action that we need to move forward with projects.

Some initiatives took longer than they should have because of having to deal with the curmudgeon. Some initiatives simply stalled out.

In short, everything takes longer, the effort is more intensive, frustration rates are higher, and the potential for damage to the institution is greater when you have to work around the disruption created by the curmudgeons.

Resist Change

New initiatives are always met with skepticism and in many cases strong resistance.

They are motivated by a desire to maintain the status quo because they have become very comfortable.

Curmudgeons may choose to participate only to ensure failure of the initiative.

They are averse to change of any type.

A curmudgeon greets every new idea with loud skepticism. Ironically, however, they generally point out the amazing new ideas being used at other institutions.

Object to every new initiative. Oppose all change from the status quo.

Fear Change

These are folks who do not like change. Anything that is a departure from the routine causes them stress, and then the curmudgeon behavior shows up.

They are motivated by a fear of change presented as an unwillingness to cooperate or collaborate.

Change is scary for this individual, and anything to maintain the status quo makes the curmudgeon happy.

In community colleges, change is all about innovation, all about creating new ideas and new opportunities. Policies, programs, and practices change or there is no innovation. Perceptions, attitudes, and philosophies of personnel in the college change or there is no innovation. Presidents in this study clearly linked innovation and change as indicators of the same process.

A true curmudgeon is against almost anything that is new or innovative.

Curmudgeons, as a whole, have always created a drag on innovation for an institution because their words and actions demoralize others.

In my experience, curmudgeons have undermined institutional efforts to implement innovative programs to better serve students, to improve operational processes, to cultivate better relationships with the outside community, and to apply successfully for grants.

Curmudgeons have created extreme barriers to excellence and high expectations.

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This is a limited study that is best understood as a first impression that taps into a widespread phenomenon that can be quite damaging to the nation's community colleges. Its major thesis is that almost all community colleges have a curmudgeon, that most have more than one, and that curmudgeons can play very destructive roles in an institution. One of their most destructive roles is to act as a barrier to change and innovation, which

are defining characteristics of the contemporary community college.

Their actions can block needed change, get presidents fired, create dissension and disgust among faculty ranks, intimidate others not to confront them or speak out, and create extra work for leaders who could be more productive in addressing more substantive issues. Curmudgeons make a lot of people unhappy and angry. More important, their negative actions can ultimately harm students, colleagues, the college, and the community. Ironically, they are seldom held accountable for their behavior and the damage they cause.

This impressionistic study of a phenomenon in community colleges is based on a limited sample of presidents, but it raises some important questions for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. Hopefully, the results of

COMMUNITY COLLEGE CURMUDGEONS

BARRIERS TO CHANGE

this study and the following questions will encourage others to pursue this topic to add more data-based information and to recommend more useful strategies to mitigate the negative impact of curmudgeons.

1. Do curmudgeons exist in K-12, four-year colleges, and universities to the same extent they do in community colleges?
2. What kinds of damage do curmudgeons in the college create in the communities served by the college?
3. How do faculty members perceive the role of curmudgeons?
4. To what extent do curmudgeons use unions and faculty senates as a base for their operations?
5. Why did presidents identify faculty and not other groups as the primary source of curmudgeons?
6. Why are more than half of curmudgeons identified by presidents located in the Humanities/Arts and Social Science areas?
7. What can faculty members do to more directly confront curmudgeons?
8. Is there a role students can play in confronting the behavior of curmudgeons?
9. What should boards of trustees, administrators, and staff do to confront the behavior of curmudgeons?
10. What are the characteristics of curmudgeons who have a positive impact on the college?
11. What do curmudgeons have to say about their behavior and motivation, and the damage they cause?
12. What are the differences and similarities among trustee, faculty, staff, and administrator curmudgeons?

This study was designed to unearth some fundamental information about curmudgeons in community colleges. The door is now open on this topic for presidents, faculty, and staff to hold conversations on campus about the behavior, motivation, and damage created by campus curmudgeons and strategies that can be used to mitigate that damage. The conversation could be rich indeed if curmudgeons were willing to participate.

Epilogue: In Defense of Curmudgeons

By design, this study reports on the negative aspects of a curmudgeon's behavior and motivation, as well as the damage curmudgeons can cause. In a few cases, presidents struggled with this emphasis on the negative and tried to explain in more humane terms the motivations and behaviors of curmudgeons. While the presidents expressed frustration in dealing with curmudgeons, some did not want to give up on them. The author had several conversations with colleagues about this issue and came up with the following observations around which more conversation and study are needed:

1. Some curmudgeons have legitimate and rational responses to perceived injustices and incompetent leadership.
2. Some curmudgeons have become cynical because of broken promises and constant changes in leadership.
3. Some curmudgeons have been passed over for promotions and recognition they deserved.
4. Some curmudgeons are very knowledgeable of college issues, policies, and programs, and are very articulate about sharing that knowledge.
5. Some curmudgeons 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 effective strategies open to them.

Several respondents hinted at the efficacy of 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.

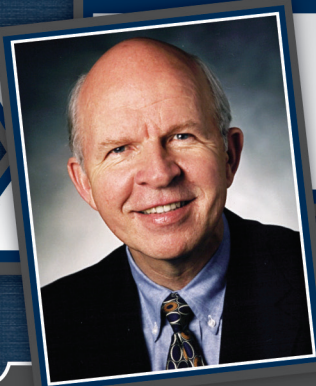
These individuals are often very knowledgeable of complex issues. I would propose that they are often behaving the way they do because they have something to say, to contribute, that they feel would be of real value but they are not provided with the chance to do so. Their frustration becomes reflected in their negativity and eventually they reach a point where the negativity is all that others see.

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 in conversations about their behaviors and the contributions they are making or want to make to the college, we might open new ways to engage them and involve them in the college with more positive results for everyone. Somewhere in our faculty and staff there are highly competent and concerned humanist risk-takers who could make the right connections with curmudgeons to help them shed the unproductive behaviors they have taken on and to rejoin the community from which they feel alienated. If this is wishful thinking, there is not much hope for the educational process in general and for our role as educators in changing behavior in particular.

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