

Curmudgeons and Change

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Curmudgeons are well represented in every kind of American institution—religious organizations, government, corporations, foundations, hospitals, unions, etc. 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 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. After numerous iterations the following definition was accepted as the definition that would guide this study.

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.

Who Are the Curmudgeons?

In the fall of 2013, a survey created by the author was distributed to 375 community college presidents who are members of the League for Innovation's Alliance—a quarterly survey issued by the League to determine presidential perspectives on community college issues. Seventy-seven presidents responded to the initial survey for a return rate of 20.5% which is average for similar quarterly surveys by the League.

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% indicated from 1—3, 32% indicated from 4—6, 18% indicated from 7—9, and 18% indicated 10 or more.

Gender of curmudgeons: Asked the gender of the curmudgeons they had known the presidents indicated 58% had been male and 2.5% had been female. However, 38% indicated that men and women were equally represented in curmudgeons they had known. Clearly, in this study men are more likely to be curmudgeons than women.

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% of the respondents. Mid-level management was selected by 6.4%, trustees by 3.8%, and students by 2.5%. Full-time faculty are clearly the primary source of curmudgeons as perceived by the presidents in this study.

Discipline affiliation of curmudgeons: The 82% 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 9 options. Both Humanities/Arts and Social Science were selected by 27% of the respondents as the discipline areas most representative of curmudgeons; 54% of all curmudgeons come from these two areas. Other was selected by 16%, Career and Technical Education by 6% and Mathematics by 5%. Health Services and Library Services were selected by 2.5% each, and Community Services and Student Services were not selected by any of the respondents.

Curmudgeons Can Damage a College

Of the 77 respondents in this study, 86% indicated impact on the college of curmudgeons they had known was either negative (49.3%) or highly negative (36.3%). 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.

The damage reported here is grouped around the kinds of damage curmudgeons create—as perceived by the presidents who provided written responses. 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.

Slowing down the pace of change emerged as a key issue for many of the presidents. Italicized comments following each section are comments from 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.

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.

My most recent curmudgeon is a member of our board who has totally changed the dynamics and positive atmosphere and direction of the board and the college.

Faculty and staff members (except perhaps the curmudgeons) prefer 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.

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 where 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.

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.

Creates adversarial relationships was a key tactic of curmudgeons. 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.

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..

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 from the president and other leaders on issues that keep them from more important work.

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 human 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.