

Orienting New Board Members: A Top Priority for Smart Districts

By Michele T. Nelson, Ph.D., Governing Board Member and
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A governing board is more than the sum of its individual members. When the composition of a board changes, even by one member, in many ways, it is a new board. Board members and the CEO have an obligation to orient new members to their responsibilities, not only to enable the new member to become a productive and contributing trustee, but also to ensure effective oversight and leadership by the CEO and the board as a whole.

Orientation to board responsibilities is not a short-term process. It takes at least a year to understand the legal responsibilities of the position, the limitations imposed by the Brown Act, and the difference between policy setting and micro management. Understanding current issues facing the district, viewing those issues in a historical context, and making decisions with the long view in mind is even more complex. Participatory governance, organizational structures, collective bargaining, and accreditation may be unfamiliar issues to new trustees who do not have backgrounds in education.

Proper trustee orientation includes both formal and informal activities designed to inform the new member about the culture and organization of the district and about the responsibilities of trusteeship. Activities must also be designed to help the board and the CEO to become an effective team. Structured activities may include candidate orientation; an orientation retreat; planning, goal setting, and evaluation retreats; and attending the Community College League of California (CCLC) Orientation Workshop and other conferences. Informal activities include reading materials about trusteeship and informal conversations with the CEO.

CANDIDATE ORIENTATION The best place to start orientation is with the candidates for the board. Candidates who are informed about the philosophy of the district and how it is organized and the responsibilities and time commitment of trusteeship will have a better idea of what they may be getting into and will be able to run more informed campaigns. Candidates can be invited to campus for a presentation by the executive administration about the mission of the college(s), long-term goals, and educational and support programs. Sample board agendas and other written materials about trusteeship can be distributed. The overall message should be that the district takes governing board membership very seriously, and that board members are expected to become contributing members of the college community as well as to represent their constituencies.

ORIENTATION RETREATS After the election, an orientation retreat scheduled with all of the trustees and the CEO is an important activity. One or two facilitators (perhaps including an experienced trustee from another district



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and a CCLC staff member) can present information about proper board roles and responsibilities in an objective manner. Even experienced trustees can learn from the presenta-



tion and discussions. A unified, cooperative, and committed board is the ideal outcome.

CCLC ORIENTATION WORKSHOP The February CCLC Trustee Orientation Workshop is very beneficial for new board members. It is a wise investment to be sure new trustees attend. CCLC staff as well as experienced trustees and CEOs facilitate sessions. Since the material presented in such a short time can be a bit overwhelming to a new trustee, board members can benefit from attending this workshop a second time, after they have been in office for a year.

CCLC TRUSTEE HANDBOOK The CCLC Trustee Handbook is a very valuable reference for all trustees.

Sections include background information on California Community Colleges and how they are organized, board roles, board ethics and self-evaluation, policy making and monitoring, relationships with the CEO and other staff, and fiscal and legal responsibilities.

PLANNING, GOAL SETTING, AND EVALUATION RETREATS Every time the board comes together, it is a learning opportunity for new board members. Retreats for the purpose of planning, goal setting, and evaluation are particularly important for understanding the vision for the future of the district, its culture, its priorities, and the progress it is making on long-term goals.

CONFERENCES The education and development of trustees should not stop after an initial orientation session. Conferences provide wonderful opportunities to learn from colleague board members and professional staff from other college districts. Presentations reinforce effective board leadership and can spark ideas to

bring back to discuss with other board members and the CEO. A more informed board is a better board.

INFORMAL ACTIVITIES An informal setting, such as a campus tour or a college event, can provide an excellent opportunity for a CEO to explain important issues and to introduce the new board member to dedicated faculty and staff. One-on-one informal meetings or telephone conversations before board meetings enable the new trustee to ask questions that may be difficult to raise in a more formal setting. One of the most important responsibilities of a CEO is to be sure board members are informed by sending them information regularly, meeting with them indi-

vidually, and calling them frequently. There are many articles and books about trusteeship that are available from the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), the League for Innovation in the Community College, the Association of Governing Boards (AGB), and Jossey-Bass, Inc. publishers. New trustees should be provided access to this literature. Ensuring that board members are educated about important issues facing the college elevates their role and expands their perspectives.

One thing is certain: the composition of a board will eventually change. New board members, like

Want more information on trustee orientation?

The Community College League publishes a special report entitled, Orientation, Education and Board Development for Community College Trustees. To get a copy, call the League office at 916-444-8641.

new CEOs, bring a new complexion to the leadership of a college district. This change often presents challenges for a board and its CEO. However, if new trustees are properly oriented to their role and to the vision and values of the district, the change can be a healthy one. The strategies outlined above have been used effectively by districts to orient and develop new trustees and to ensure the effectiveness of the board and CEO. Community colleges require the competent oversight of informed and dedicated trustees. CEOs and boards must provide the opportunities for new trustees to learn their roles, and new trustees must make their orientation a top priority.



How Good Boardsmanship Pays Big Election Dividends

Trustees thinking of running for other offices might take the advice of two former trustees who now hold county-wide office: Doing a good job as a trustee can be a big benefit when election time comes around.

Trustees throughout California have found running for city council, county board of supervisors, the state legislature and other elected offices a challenging but ultimately rewarding experience. There are currently four former California community college trustees in the state legislature, one in Congress (see list) and others in local city and county positions.

Cynthia Coad, a supervisor in Orange County, says her work as a trustee on the North Orange County Community College District helped establish her credentials as a credible candidate by showing voters her interest in county issues and her willingness to “stick to my guns.”

Doris Ward, the Assessor-Recorder of the City and County of San Francisco and a former San Francisco supervisor, says serving on the city’s community college district board helped demonstrate to voters that she was able to work effectively with various constituency groups toward a positive outcome.

Coad, a former vocational ESL instructor at Fullerton and Cypress colleges, was elected to the North Orange CCCD board in 1992 and then again in 1996. In 1998 she ran successfully for a seat on the powerful five-member county board of supervisors. Her experience as a trustee proved invaluable.

“I was already in the loop when I became a supervisor,” she explains. “On key issues such as welfare-to-work and economic development, I had hands-on knowledge based on my years on the college board. I know how important education is for gang prevention. I know how important education is to keep the economic engine of our county going at full steam.”

The fact that the North Orange college district was the only governmental entity in the county not to suffer financially from the county’s 1994 bankruptcy was also a point in her favor when seeking another elected office. “I knew we were in the right and I stuck to my guns to be sure the district didn’t lose any money,” she said. “Doing a good job can lead to even better things.”

Doris Ward served on the City College of San Francisco board from 1972 to 1979, when she was elected to the board of supervisors. After serving 12 years as a supervisor, she was appointed in 1992 to her current position. She was elected in 1994 and re-elected in 1998. As assessor-recorder, Ward is responsible for establishing the taxable value of all property and overseeing the various responsibilities of the county clerk-recorder, includ-



Cynthia P. Coad
Supervisor, Fourth District
Orange County



Rudy Cardenas, Jr.
Candidate
Board of Supervisors
Imperial County

Trustees who now serve elsewhere...

Joe Baca (former San Bernardino CCD board of trustees) is a member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Denise Ducheny (San Diego CCD) serves in the California Assembly and is chair of the Budget Committee.

Gloria Romero (Los Angeles CCD) is Majority Whip in the California Assembly.

Hilda Solis (Rio Hondo CCD) serves in the California Senate where she is chair of the Industrial Relations Committee.

Wally Knox (Los Angeles CCD) is a member of the California Assembly where he chairs the Revenue and Tax Committee.

ing issuing marriage licenses and performing civil marriages.

Serving on the college board “was an excellent training ground. It taught me the politics of the art of compromise,” says Ward. “We had various constituencies that wanted things that were sometimes in opposition to each other and you have to come up with a way of meeting their sometimes disparate needs.”

College trustees are just like other office holders, these former trustees agree. When they are doing their job right they are accessible, listening to the community, and pulling together coalitions to get things done on behalf of the college.

Rudy Cardenas, Jr., a 12-year veteran of the Imperial Community College District board, hopes to garner a seat on the board of supervisors in Imperial County with a victory in next month’s primary. He’s running against two challengers for an open seat. “My college experience and my record of positive achievement have been a great benefit to my campaign,” he reports. “I’m well known in the community because of my service on the board and the respect people hold for the work we do.”

He says running for the board of supervisors is just about the same as running for the college board: “Meet people, raise money and get out the vote.” Cardenas believes strongly that if elected “my experience as a trustee will really make it easier for me. I know how to work with others to get something done for the good of the community.”




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