

A Survey of VCCS Colleges' Local Boards

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Abstract

Malick makes recommendations for local boards based on a recent VCCS survey which sought to determine how the State Governing Board could assist and support the members of the local boards in their role as advisors to their presidents and institutions.

As I observed in my introduction to *New Directions For Community Colleges: Enhancing Trustee Effectiveness*, “the challenges to governing boards today have never been greater.” The challenge remains! In his April 2000 keynote address to the SCHEV Conference, Dr. E. Bruce Heilman, Chancellor, University of Richmond, issued a call to change the culture of the governing boards of every Virginia higher education institution. In his words: “if we always do what we’ve always done, we’ll always get what we’ve always got.”

The Virginia Community College Governing Board accepted this challenge. It ushered in a new era with the appointment of Chancellor Glenn Dubois. His experience, insight and energy helped set into motion other needed changes. Significant modifications were made to both System and Board policies, including improving lines of communication through regular reports, memos, and e-mails; inspiring and involving the Board in policy-level decisions to ensure that members feel ownership in the colleges they serve; promoting a greater emphasis on trustee education through in-service opportunities, professional association meetings, and the publication of a *New Board Member Handbook*; and conducting the first facilitated State Board Retreat which focused on Board team building, policies, effectiveness, accountability and long-range goals. This retreat was especially important since more than half of the Board Members were new.

In the context of these improvements at the state level, I proposed a survey instrument for distribution to local boards to ascertain current practices and views of our partners at the twenty-three state community colleges. In our Commonwealth, local trustees are usually appointed for four-year terms by county executives or supervisors and

represent all the adjoining counties in each institution's service area. Local boards provide advice and support and help keep colleges in touch with the community they serve. According to Lee Teitel, advisory boards/committees "can provide fresh insights, powerful connections, access to valuable resources and excellent public relations." However, often this potential is not realized. Therefore, it was necessary to find out how the State Governing Board could assist and support the members of the local boards in their role as advisors to their presidents and institutions. A nine-question survey was distributed to all VCCS local boards, and a total of 111 surveys were returned for a 39% return rate. In Spring 2002, Dr. Susan Coffey, VCCS Director of Professional Development, compiled the survey results. The following analysis is based upon that data.

Local board members were asked in the first question whether the colleges held an orientation for new board members. Although 85% of board members indicated that they did receive an "orientation," their experiences varied greatly. From meetings before or after the first board meeting to half-day and even day-long sessions, these "orientations" included 1) campus/college visits and tours; 2) one-on-one meeting or lunch with the college president to discuss his/her mission and the college's important issues; 3) receiving a letter of welcome and information about the college, including the policy manual, board by-laws, college catalog; 4) a PowerPoint presentation about the college including budget and statistical data; 5) meetings with college leaders, department heads and board chair; and 6) sessions on board duties, committee functions and discussions of expectations of board members. One college board reported that it was in the process of developing an orientation program.

To the second question, most board members (68%) replied that their college did not have an annual board retreat; however, there may have been some confusion as to what constitutes an "annual retreat." Among the descriptions of retreats were 1) board picnics; 2) community service programs; 3) meetings to discuss the role of board members; 4) sessions to develop/examine college strategic plans or goals; and 5) use of an outside facilitator to discuss board role, policy and calendar.

When asked in the third question whether they participated in local "in-service" programs, a majority of the board members (73%) indicated they did not. The fourth question focused on other activities attended by local board members. Most board members attended the VCCA convention (67%) or the State Board's Annual Meeting (23%). In addition, a very few (4%) attended the State Council of Education (SCHEV's) Board of Visitors Conference, attended the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCC) Convention (2%), and attended the Association of

Community College Trustees (ACCT) Convention (3%). Some (13%) reported attending other professional development programs, such as SACS meetings, college staff and faculty retreats, department/discipline meetings, and fundraising/grants workshops.

The responses to question five revealed that 85% of the board members participated in the work of committees and actively discussed their community college with others, most often local business leaders (86%), local government officials (85%), community organizations (84%), members of the General Assembly (35%), and others (34%). In addition, 90% participated in college events, 55% assisted in fund raising, and 59% helped with college public relations.

When asked in question six whether they have attempted to assess their performance as board members, 91% indicated they did not. For the 9% who did, a self-report board performance checklist was used as an assessment tool. One college board was planning to develop an instrument to assess its performance.

In response to question seven, the vast majority of board members (90%) indicated that there was a social/networking opportunity either before or after their board meetings and they were satisfied with the current level of social interaction. Regarding the meeting time in question eight, the majority (66%) of board meetings are held in the afternoon, and the remainder reported evening meetings. Board members (92%) indicated that the time chosen was generally convenient.

Board members were asked in question nine to react on a scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree, no opinion) to six statements. They responded as follows:

- experience as a board member has been positive and meaningful (mean of 3.6)
- want to be more involved with statewide initiatives aimed at strengthening the community college system (mean of 3.2)
- want to learn more about priorities and initiatives developed by the State Board/ System office (mean of 3.1)
- welcome more interaction with State Board members (mean of 3.1)
- want more professional development opportunities (mean of 3.1)

- favor participating in statewide legislative campaigns on behalf of the community colleges (mean of 3.0)

At the end of the survey, the board members had an opportunity to offer suggestions on ways to increase their effectiveness as local board members. Their recommendations included 1) gaining a greater understanding of the role of the State Board, 2) interacting with and having input to the State Board, 3) being more informed about the events/issues/challenges of the Virginia community colleges. Interestingly, those who had indicated their previous attendance at the State Board's Annual Meeting recognized it as the most effective way to achieve all three of the above.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the survey results:

- Most (over 75%) new board members experienced an orientation; however, what is called "orientation" varies greatly.
- A significant majority, (66%) of board members have not been afforded the opportunity to participate in an annual Board Retreat.
- Nearly 75% of board members have not participated in any local in-service education.
- Very few board members attended professional conferences or conventions with the exception of the VCCA meeting.
- An overwhelming majority of board members are active in the business of their board and the affairs of their college.
- Other than a checklist used by a small fraction of board members, there has been no attempt at assessment of board performance.
- Most board members believe that the opportunities for social interaction and meeting schedules are appropriate.

Recommendations from the survey results include the following:

- More effective local board meetings might result if colleges shared their "best practices" with each other on a regular basis.
- Board "retreats" might be considered at more colleges as those held were viewed as very positive. Annual retreats can provide an opportunity for team building, board skill development, policy evaluation and goal planning.
- Board members are receptive to "assessing" their performance. Engaging in an annual process of appropriate self-evaluation may assist boards in identifying areas of strength and developing strategies to improve

effectiveness.

- Well planned and thorough “orientation” programs can bring new trustees up to speed and help the college board be more effective in meeting the needs of its constituents.
- Although board members bring a broad spectrum of knowledge and experience to the table, in order to fully understand what is involved in being a community college trustee, enhance board performance and truly be accountable to the public, “in-service” education is critical. Participation must be promoted in all the major state professional development activities, such as the State Board Annual Meeting, VCCS New Horizons Conference, VCCA Convention, and the SCHEV Board of Visitors Conference. These meetings also provide an opportunity for local board members to interact with members of the State Board.
- Local board members should also be encouraged to attend national association meetings such as those held by the Association of Community College Trustees and the American Association of Community Colleges. ACCT and AACC serve their members by providing a platform for cutting edge issues, research, support materials and publications; in addition, they offer trustees a much needed opportunity to network and learn from one another. After all, dedicated board members are professionals who need to devote time to ongoing education and development.
- Colleges should continue to encourage and recognize the role that their local boards are playing/can play in promoting the colleges to local and state representatives, officials and agencies.

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