

Governing towards democracy: Challenges and opportunities of trustees at urban community colleges

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to enhance understanding and appreciation of the current and potential role of trustees in urban community colleges. In working to make sure students are successful, trustees face numerous challenges in implementing high-impact policies and practices that center student success. This article establishes a node connecting an understudied topic (governance), and an understudied group (trustees), within an oft-forgotten context (community colleges). The focus is on the influential role that urban community colleges play in serving educationally, economically, and ethnically marginalized populations and how the trustees must necessarily govern with these groups in mind.

INTRODUCTION

"If community colleges are to meet the rising and conflicting expectations of their multiple constituencies in an era of increasing external and internal pressures, they will need highly effective governance and leadership to guide them."

(Amey et al., 2008, p. 10)

"Of all the people involved in the community college—students, faculty, administrators, and trustees—the trustees are most likely to be overlooked, although their role in institutional planning and governance is, of course, critical to the institution's operation."

(Russock, 1974, p. 57)

The two leading quotes above paradigmatically frame the impetus for this article—if governance is so integral to addressing community college needs, why is it that governing boards are most likely to be overlooked? How might a focus on governance, and governing boards specifically, be leveraged to enhance community colleges? In prior work within

the broader higher education landscape, scholars have highlighted the dearth in governance literature (Kater et al., 2022; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Rall et al., 2021) and board literature (Amey, 2022). In particular, scholars have demonstrated the need for additional research focused on both equity and boards of higher education in order to address some of the most pressing issues that face higher education (Morgan et al., 2022; Rall et al., 2022). For example, institutional barriers that limit student success on campus focus on areas such as subpar advising or absent faculty engagement (Hagedorn et al., 2008; Hallett et al., 2020; Thomas & McFarlane, 2018) have been explored. However, the literature omits sufficient consideration of the role trustees might play in addressing these challenges. Further, research has shown that within the existing governance scholarship, certain institution types that serve the majority of marginalized groups, like Minority Serving Institutions or community colleges, are often left out (Association of Community College Trustees [ACCT], 2018; Minor, 2004). At the intersection of these gaps is an even more limited area of scholarship—trustees of urban community colleges. In the present writing, I establish a node connecting an understudied topic (governance), and an understudied group (trustees), within an oft forgotten context (community colleges).

Community colleges assume a democratizing role in higher education (Ortagus et al., 2021). In fact, community colleges assume an integral social, political, and economic role in their respective communities (Anderson & Davies, 2000; Ma & Baum, 2016). The focus of this article is on the influential role that urban community colleges play in serving educationally, economically, and ethnically marginalized populations (Cohen et al., 2014; Grubbs, 2019; Gupton, 2017) and how the trustees of these institutions must necessarily govern with these groups in mind. Accordingly, the goal of this article is to provide information to enhance understanding and appreciation of the current and potential role of trustees in the community college sector. In working to make sure students are successful, trustees face numerous challenges in implementing high impact policies and practices that center student success (AGB, n.d.). I begin with a brief overview of community colleges, urban community colleges, and community college trustees before discussing challenges and opportunities for trustees as they prioritize equity and student success within their fiduciary duties within the community college milieu.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges, which sit at the intersection of social justice and educational change, hold an important place in higher education (Zamani-Gallaher, 2016) as they strive to serve increasingly diverse student populations (Rhoads & Valadez, 2016). They act as critical points of access for millions of students who may have otherwise not had the opportunity to attend college—particularly racially minoritized, first-generation, low-income, or non-traditional-aged students (Baber et al., 2019; Razfar & Simon, 2011). Moreover, when compared to what the literature describes as “traditional students,” the majority of community college students are “nontraditional,” having full-time jobs and familial responsibilities or distinct obligations that other students often do not have to consider (Deil-Amen, 2015). Community college students also have a broader range of educational and career goals (Cox & Sallee, 2018), ages, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Rennis et al., 2015).

Marked by lower tuition, open enrollment, and differentiated mission (vocational training, transfer preparation, and basic skills instruction) (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Stevens et al., 2019), community colleges provide on-ramps to postsecondary education and gainful employment for many individuals (Baber et al., 2019). Whether in spite of or

because of the broad swath of students, programs, contexts, and roles they serve, the influence and potential of community colleges is clear; they educate nearly 40% of all US undergraduates (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2022) and are home to the majority of marginalized students (e.g., students of color) who are enrolled in public postsecondary education (D'Amico et al., 2022; Wood & Newman, 2017). While community colleges are often populated with the largest and most vulnerable populations, the institutions are often plagued with issues of transfer barriers to success (Glynn, 2019; Goldrick-Rab, 2010), inconsistent enrollment (McKinney et al., 2022), disproportionate placement of marginalized groups in below-basic courses (Chen, 2016) and a host of other issues.

Over the years, some have acknowledged the centrality of community colleges due to their transfer function (Hagedorn et al., 2008), yet community colleges are seldom part of the conversation to understanding college access for marginalized groups (Bragg & Dunham, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to further examine access for marginalized communities within the urban community college context (Dache-Gerbino & White, 2016). Community colleges are housed within a range of geographic, historic, social, economic, and political forces across the 50 states (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017).

Urban community colleges

Of the students of color who enroll in community colleges, the majority enroll in urban community colleges (Ivery & Myran, 2019; Wood & Newman, 2017). Urban community colleges are so named based on their proximity to urban centers and the overall population of the area (Wood & Newman, 2017). These institutions must address the challenges common to all community colleges with the added pressures of facing urban environments and serving vulnerable populations—overwhelmingly poor, immigrant, and first-generation college students (Ellerton et al., 2015; Hagedorn & Cepeda, 2004). These colleges face unique challenges (e.g., hypersegregation and microaggressions) (Wood & Newman, 2017) and opportunities (Miller & Smith, 2022) within large metropolitan regions and serve students that often “lack financial resources, basic literacy, good study habits, time management, and other college-related skills, and require at least one developmental course to become college ready” (Myran & Parsons, 2013, p. 11). Instead of applying a student deficit approach, however, it is important to note that urban community colleges tend to lack sufficient resources to meet the needs of underserved communities (Myran & Parsons, 2013; Roueche et al., 2001). In spite of the lack of institutional resources, urban colleges lead the way to the democratization of higher education via “the open door of educational opportunity” (Myran & Parsons, 2013, p. 7).

Community college trustees

In the community college, leadership requires institutional decision-makers to reconcile the factors that shape the college and the college's relationship to society at large (Rhoads & Valadez, 2016). In particular, diminished access, decreased funding, and various sociopolitical issues have implications for community college governance (Levin & Kater, 2013). Because “[l]eaders are challenged to transform the very nature of the urban community college” (Myran & Parsons, 2013, p. 7), a look at one particular group of decision-makers is important. Trustees of community colleges play “...a vital role in college and student success through governance and oversight of the mission of open access higher education” (White, 2022, p. 63). A challenge before community college boards is that they govern

institutions with direct ties to the community and “are called upon to serve a wide variety of needs of people throughout their neighborhoods, cities, and regions, as well as their states” (Polonio, 2005, para 3).

The community college operates in an environment of both promise and despair (Myran & Parsons, 2013). The plurality of institutional objectives (Baime & Baum, 2016) at community colleges requires a higher level of intervention to make widespread change. Many plans to improve experiences and outcomes for marginalized populations within the community college setting emphasize the role of faculty (Wood & Newman, 2017), staff (Bahr, 2008), presidents (D’Amico et al., 2022), and even family (Sáenz et al., 2018), but neglect the centrality of key governance actors such as trustees. Or, if trustees are the topic of research, the focus stagnates at the level of board structure and composition (Fletcher & Friedel, 2017). Further, while research considers the influence of integration-focused efforts, finances, job markets, and the geography of opportunity (Galster & Killen, 1995; Reyes et al., 2019; Tate, 2008) for community college student success, governance is seldom presented as a viable path to improvement. Board members lack accountability; trustees are not required to leverage any of the professional development opportunities and knowledge provided for them (Thelin, 2019). At the same time, they might not be provided with the resources they need to be efficacious in their roles. A few works, such as Hartley’s (2010) research, examine the influence of governance on campus outcomes. However, this research explored the topic at a large urban community college within the context of faculty unionizations and did not focus on boards.

There is an overall dearth of literature on urban community college trustees. Yet, overall, it is understood that community college institutions have various governance models (White, 2019). Community colleges are governed by trustees that are either locally elected, locally appointed, state elected, or state appointed (Kater et al., 2022; Vaughan, 2006). Community college trustees represent the public and serve as a conduit between the community and the institution (Russock, 1974). These boards have the ultimate authority over all matters of institutional operation (Piland & Bublitz, 1998; Rall, 2021; Tendler & Wilson, 1970). The board’s presence (Nielsen et al., 2003) and questions (Tendler & Wilson, 1970) have long informed action on campuses, but boards are not without their limitations. While the student populations stem from primarily marginalized groups, despite slight increases in leadership diversity, community colleges still leave white males “clearly in charge of the board room and the ‘president’s office’” (Vaughan & Weismann, 1997, p.7). The Association of Community College Trustees’ (2018) recent survey highlighted that 55% of trustees identified as male, 49% were 65 or older, and 76% were White. Notwithstanding compositional shortcomings, boards intentionally and passively inform campus experiences and outcomes.

To be clear, this is not a call for boards to do new, additional work outside of their traditional roles and responsibilities. Instead, the work of community college boards, in particular, must be done with equity in mind. In fact, the idea that equity is a fiduciary duty may be more relevant in urban community colleges than in other sectors. As the final authority in higher education, all roads lead back to the governing board (Rall et al., 2020).

The reality is that multiple stakeholders should share responsibility and accountability in higher education; shared leadership towards equity goals, for example, can help create culture change on campus by linking individual and organizational transformation (Kezar et al., 2021; Kezar et al., 2022). Boards play an integral role with various stakeholder groups, and while the context varies, their roles and responsibilities are similar. Governing boards of community colleges are especially important as they play a vital role in examining presidential selection criteria and ultimately appointing the presidents of these institutions (Plinske & Packard, 2010). Boards of trustees maintain the ultimate authority for selecting

a community college president (Association of Community College Trustees, 2009)—the role that scholars identify as one of, if not the most important roles of community college boards (Boggs, 2006). Consider, too, the historical role of trustees in collective bargaining (Howe, 1973) and their centrality in strategic planning (a practice led by governing boards) for all campuses (Morgan et al., 2021) and community colleges in particular (Harder, 2010). In the next section, I explore the potential impact of trustees on specific (and essential) areas of community colleges.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRUSTEE SUPPORT AT URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Committed to social mobility, community colleges have worked to increasingly support students in obtaining postsecondary degrees; however, equity gaps remain (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Hagedorn et al. (2008) put forth that in community college transfer, “The roots of the problems are academic, and only academic solutions will make a difference” (p. 661). However, research has shown that governance should also be a contender as a solution to those issues that plague community colleges. Academic approaches are insufficient; considerations of strategic decision making by higher education leadership should also be prioritized. Transformational leadership in community colleges spurs the question, “How are they shaping their futures in the face of persistent and entrenched racial, educational, economic, and social inequities in our cities and society?” (Myran & Parsons, 2013, p. 16). For example, Myran and Parsons (2013) suggested that the governing board should be engaged in efforts to address barriers to student achievement. In particular, the board needs to center principles of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion (JDEI) in its decision making. Governing through the JDEI lens is a high-impact practice oft left off scholars’ best practice lists like those proposed by Polonio (2005). As the final authority in higher education, all roads lead back to the governing board.

Governing boards of community colleges perform key functions, including selecting and appointing the chancellor or president of the institution, establishing policies ensuring fiscal integrity, and performing other management functions (Kater et al., 2022; Lovell & Truth, 2002; White et al., 2022). Boards of urban community colleges must address pressing issues facing their institutions. For example, to address the myriad and longstanding transfer issues, trustees must well understand the transfer program (Cohen et al., 2014; Russock, 1974). Regardless of effectiveness, board governance plays a crucial role in higher education (White, 2019). Accordingly, community college leaders may need to think about leadership in different ways in order to address challenges (Amey, 2021; Eddy & Khwaja, 2019; Kezar, 1998).

Although prior research has demonstrated that some community college students often prioritize the immediate needs and realities over the longer-term implications of their decisions (McKinney et al., 2015), this does not preclude campus decision-makers from making changes that will impact the future of these students. An emphasis on policies and practices (and those that create them) may cultivate enhanced conditions that lead to better student experiences and outcomes. Focusing on policies and practices necessarily demands consideration of boards of higher education. Issues related to institutional mission, strategic planning, program review, and resource allocation typically fall under governing board purview (Lucey, 2002). It has been long established that boards make faculty appointments, establish student conduct rules, set wage scales, supervise investments, approve retirement plans, oversee plans for facilities, decide on athletic program expenditures, set tuition, and more (Kater et al., 2022; Tandler & Wilson, 1970). Their

prevalence in key decision-making establishes the possibilities for impact. At the most rudimentary level, trustees can positively influence community college outcomes and overall wellbeing through a concentration on mission, finances, leadership, and logistics. In the following text, I situate the opportunities for trustee support within these four areas.

A mission issue

The mission statement of the institution is the most highly respected and public document that is referenced when difficult choices need to be made (Ayers, 2017; Meacham & Gaff, 2006). Mission statements of community colleges are guided by social context (Halliday & Webster, 2009) and it is the board that advances the institution's mission through support and innovation (Longanecker, 2006). Community colleges have three primary roles: transfer, vocational, and community education; and therefore, must embrace multiple identities (Cohen et al., 2014; Rhoads & Valadez, 2016) in order to maximize access and opportunity (Grubbs, 2019; Monaghan et al., 2018). Institutional mission statements must be revised periodically in order to ensure that the mission reflects the present and projected needs of the community, both local and beyond (Ayers, 2017; Oromaner & Fujita, 1993). For example, due to political and economic influences (Grubbs, 2019), the role of community colleges has expanded from strictly university parallel programs to full-service colleges needing to address changing and increased issues like budgeting, accountability, educational objectives and technology (Brown, 2021; Cohen et al., 2014; Gleazer, 1994; Martin, 2021). Academic programs ought to reflect the mission of the institution (Meacham & Gaff, 2006). Trustees are primary stewards of the institutional mission and should act in ways that advance the mission (Meacham & Gaff, 2006). Accordingly, trustees set, clarify, review, maintain, and endorse the mission and purpose of the institution (Kater et al., 2022; Ingram, 1997).

Student challenges related to achieving educational and professional success within the community college are inextricably linked to the mission (Aykol et al., 2021). Boards must ensure that the mission can be enacted in practice and "...be certain that their organization does what it says and says what it does" (Meacham & Gaff, 2006, p. 6). For example, the mission statements of most community colleges highlight their essential transfer role (Hagedorn et al., 2008). Yet community colleges struggle to support their students in transfer and are underfunded to serve their students (White, 2022). Instead of continuing to perpetuate the narrative that students are unprepared or that institutions have low transfer rates, what would it mean to frame this challenge as community colleges have failed to live up to their mission and hold community college boards accountable for any incongruence? To make the shortcoming more tangible for trustees, how might we move from X% of transfer to X% of mission alignment? Further, how do we hold boards responsible for this shift in perspective when research has shown that though there are heightened calls for board accountability, accountability of this decision-making body is lacking (Kater et al., 2022; Martin, 2021; Phelan, 2022)? A focus on trustees makes it so the issue is not the problem of everyone else or centered at a lower level of decision-making, but rather inadequate transfer rates become a breach of a core tenet that resides squarely within the purview of the board. "The challenge for policymakers and advocates of [community colleges] is to improve these student outcomes in order to fulfill the promise of the community college institutional mission" (Sublett, 2019, p. 824). So how and to what effect are these community college mission statements meaningful (Ayers & Brooks, 2019), and how does context (e.g., urban) (Ayers, 2010) need to be a point of focus? The mission of community colleges

is multifaceted and requires that community college leaders like trustees recognize and act on their role in enacting the social justice contract (Heelan & Mellow, 2017).

A leadership issue

The AACC (2018) connects mission to leadership when noting: “An effective community college leader understands and embraces the importance of championing community college ideals [and] understands how to mobilize stakeholders to take action on behalf of the college” (p. 16). Leadership in the urban community colleges has an increasingly important role to play in this sector (Ivery & Myran, 2019). Trustees and presidents should be unified in vision and goals as they lead community colleges (Vaughan & Weismann, 1997; White, 2022). Because community college presidents can offer much needed stability, accountability, and restoration of institutional morale (Thompson et al., 2012), the role that trustees carry in presidential selection is vital. Through their direct selection of the president, boards indirectly influence presidential roles, such as creating new academic programs and capital projects (Smith & Miller, 2015). The selection of the chief executive is particularly essential because presidents work closely with governing boards (Phelan, 2022; Thompson et al., 2012). When selecting the chief executive, boards would do well to consider leaders who have demonstrated a commitment to equity. Moreover, it is important to consider the leadership of the intermediary role of trustees interfacing with other actors like municipal leaders, state policymakers, and others (Rall et al., 2022). In addition to their intentional selection of presidents, through their primary tool of inquiry, boards direct decision making on campuses both actively and passively (Rall, 2021; Rall et al., 2020).

A financial issue

While scholars suggest appointing committees or institutional leaders to address the stress on basic needs based on financial strains (e.g., Goldrick-Rab, 2018), it is important to remember that we have such groups in place that are already tasked with all facets of the institution—boards of trustees. Trustees set or influence tuition that may serve as a barrier to students (Flores & Shepherd, 2014; Kim & Ko, 2015). Using disaggregated institutional data, trustees should examine the costs associated not only with access but also completion. They do not engage in this practice consistently or well and so accordingly, connecting important issues like transfer and completion to the return on investment are essential. What are those steps that can streamline costs without forsaking quality?

A logistical issue

Despite a mission that pushes for access and opportunity, the administration, management, and governance of community colleges often present a logistical hurdle. In the 21st century, community colleges should be fluid organizations (Amey, 2022; Levin, 2000), yet too few community college students persist (Conway, 2009). As bureaucratic institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Gold & Kerly, 2019; Sowl & Brown, 2021), community colleges depend on rules, regulations, and legal authority for governance to establish formal decision-making roles and a chain of command for authority (Kater & Levin, 2004). Yet these formal structures and pathways often impede success in community colleges. To

TABLE 1 Challenges and opportunities of community college board roles and responsibilities.

Role/Responsibility of the board	Description*	Challenge	Opportunity
Mission	Establishing, disseminating, and keeping current the mission of the institution	Mission statements are often out of date and not directly connected to issues of transfer	Connect challenges facing community colleges to institutional mission and to trustees
Finances	Ensuring the institution's fiscal integrity, preserving and protecting its assets for posterity, and engaging directly in fundraising and philanthropy	Today's price of attendance at the community college level is higher than ever	Seek fundraising and philanthropy that helps support the most marginalized students
Leadership	Selecting, supporting, and assessing the chief executive of the institution/system	Majority of presidents are not evaluated/ selected on the basis of equity and access.	Select and evaluate institution heads based on commitments to equitable student success and establish more intentional collaboration
Logistics	Ensuring that policies and processes of the institution remain current and are properly implemented	Policies in place make it challenging for students to transfer (e.g., get the courses they need in a timely fashion)	Retool the process for courses and qualitatively and quantitatively assess how remedial courses are determined, course times and frequencies, DFW courses, and so forth and use that data in board decision making

*Adapted from AGB, 2019.

remain relevant, community colleges must consistently redevelop their policies, products, processes, and services in order to thrive (Sipe, 2020).

Marginalized students seek and rely on institutional support to efficiently and effectively navigate college (Bivens & Wood, 2016; Harris & Wood, 2013; Santiago, 2016). It would be prudent to assess how governing boards influence policy and whether changes in governance may advance the attainment agenda (White, 2019). At present, our most marginalized students disproportionately enroll in community colleges that often struggle to provide the guidance and structure so sorely needed by these groups (McKinney et al., 2022). Though well-known for their commitment to open access (Hagedorn et al., 2008), community colleges often struggle with graduation outcomes (Reyes et al., 2019) and in the urban sector specifically, inequity exists in myriad forms (Bing et al, 2020). Trustee boards can intentionally work in this area. Unfortunately, governing boards have been primarily concerned with maintaining the way things are rather than taking part in change to lead to the way things can be (Longanecker, 2006).

Table 1 highlights the various opportunities and challenges present for boards of trustees based on a range of board responsibilities. Phelan (2022) argues that boards of trustees operate at a range of levels of engagement that represent different hierarchies, with Covenant Governance representing a high level of partnership and engagement.

Through political and financial decisions, politics, and practices, the educational opportunities for some are limited while the educational opportunities for others are promoted (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Community colleges' ability to fulfill the promise of increased

postsecondary opportunity for nontraditional students is complicated by their location within systems that are being reshaped by the tenets of neoliberalism (Levin, 2007). It is important to understand the impact of governance on institutional outcomes such as effectiveness (Reyes & Twombly, 1986). Taken together, trustees have multiple opportunities to ensure the quality of education provided by the institution by centering-oriented reform (Felix & Ramirez, 2023). Given the importance of community colleges to their communities and the large number of students they prepare for the workforce or for transfer to 4-year institutions (Harder, 2010), a focus on the roles and responsibilities of community college trustees is necessary.

Though I suggest that boards need to play a more active and intentional role in bringing equity to fruition in urban community colleges, I want to be clear that they cannot do the work alone. The campus chief executive, administrators, state and national community college organizations, and others must offer training and support if important initiatives are to be sustained (McRaven & Somers, 2017). Colleges depend on key stakeholders to guide operations and make critical decisions related to which activities and programs to support (Miller & Smith, 2022). It is, however, boards and boards alone that “are uniquely positioned to advance change in ways that other institutional stakeholders cannot...they can illuminate context, ensure attention to the issues, hold institutions accountable for progress, and contribute their resources, insight, and wisdom” (Eckel & Trower, 2016, p.4).

CONCLUSION

Urban colleges are gatekeepers for social equity and increase the number of low-income, minoritized groups who contribute to the knowledge-based economy (Myran & Parsons, 2013). Though they demonstrate the potential to reframe the definition of “democracy’s college,” urban community colleges still have a long way to go to achieve equality (Myran & Parsons, 2013). In a higher education environment and larger societal ecosystem faced with challenges and opportunities related to equity in myriad forms, it is important to focus on areas that can lead to consistent, long-term, and exponential transformational change. Achieving enhanced outcomes for marginalized groups requires weaving equity into the fabric of the community college (Felix & Ramirez, 2023). Given the number and type of students they serve, their broad mission and scope, and their connection to the local surroundings, community colleges are an established and critical component of the higher education system and vital to the economic development of our nation (Plinske & Packard, 2010). Because they are so integral and show the greatest potential to impact the labor market (White, 2019), it is imperative to not only pay attention to the vast diversity of needs of community college students, especially those at a higher risk of not completing their degrees or certificates or securing employment (Reyes et al., 2019) but also to intentionally impact the trajectories of these students.

If community colleges serve as a substrate for higher education, trustees necessarily serve as a substrate for the way we can bring about changes needed in higher education. Trustees set institutional policies that should then translate to campus practices. Because the majority of community college literature laments the logistical and structural challenges to success (however defined—transfer, certificate, etc.), the fiduciary duties of trustees compel them to act to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. “Indeed, the future economic, civic, and social development of our society and the role of public higher education in that development can be influenced by the actions of governing boards. The role of governing boards, therefore, is important” (Longanecker, 2006, p. 96).

In this chapter, I used a brief overview of community colleges (accentuating urban community colleges), and governance to set up four factors that are simultaneously challenges

and opportunities for urban community colleges. It is not enough to simply go through the motions for democracy in higher education, we must govern *toward* democracy, with a specific direction in mind, centering issues of equity, access, diversity, and inclusion. Just as the future of urban community colleges is tied to the future of disenfranchised and impoverished groups (Ivery & Myran, 2019), the future of urban community colleges is also connected to boards of these institutions. Without a focus on community college trustees, permanently improving organizational effectiveness is impossible. Trustees of all higher education institutions, but particularly trustees of community colleges, stand in prime position to establish, lead, and maintain the way forward.

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