

# Perspectives

Community College  
Leadership for the  
21st Century

SUMMER 2018

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[The president/  
Board Chair  
relationship] is  
arguably the most  
important partnership  
in higher education  
because, in tandem,  
the board chair and  
the president lead  
the board in defining  
its responsibilities  
[and] in setting the  
institution's strategic  
direction...

- Douglas Orr

For a board and  
president to work  
together effectively,  
their relationship has  
to be strong, based on  
shared work, frank  
discussions, and trust  
built over time.

- Susan Whealler  
Johnston

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## Effective, Engaged, and Energized: Developing Strong Board/President Relationships that Benefit Students

**Jo Alice Blondin, PhD**

President  
and

**Sharon M. Evans, MBA**

Chair, Board of Trustees  
Clark State Community College  
Springfield, Ohio

Clark State Community College was honored to receive the American Association of Community Colleges Award of Excellence for CEO/Board Relations. This recognition really highlighted five years of strong, successful, and sustained collaboration among the Clark State Board of Trustees and the President, with the benefits of this relationship accruing to Clark State's students. Clark State's Board of Trustees is deeply committed to the success of our students, who become and serve as an integral part of our workforce and community.

Clark State's Board is characterized by diversity—in professional background, socioeconomic status, race, age, and geography. Appointed by the Governor of Ohio, Clark State Board of Trustee members serve six-year terms. Currently, Clark State's Board includes members who are in their first term, as well as long-serving Trustees, including one Board member who has served for twenty years. In order to function as a body corporate, a Board of Trustees must engage in a number of best practices that keep the focus on "what matters most"—the students.

*Communication is the cornerstone of  
Clark State's Board and President's  
success.*

In Joshua Wyner's book, *What Excellent Community Colleges Do: Preparing All Students for Success*, he talks about one hallmark of leadership that is key for "excellent" community colleges—"shifting the focus to what matters most." Wyner talks about moving the college's collective thinking from inputs to student outcomes at all levels, starting with the President and the Board of Trustees. This very shift—from inputs to outcomes—is the basis for strong college Boards/President relationships. In fact, Wyner's book has been distributed to and read by our Board of Trustees, the President, and many Clark State faculty and staff.

As we reflect on our recent AACC Award of Excellence, as well as the past five years of leadership, best practices and characteristics of our effective, engaged, and energized Board of Trustees and President have emerged. These best practices and characteristics include:

**Communication.** Communication is the cornerstone of Clark State's Board and President's success. The President consistently and appropriately communicates with the Board about

strategic initiatives, challenging issues, and situations that either require their attention and/or expertise. The President keeps an open line of communication with the Board and ensures transparency in all interactions with the Board. The College holds ten Board of Trustees' meetings annually, as well as ten Board Finance and Facilities' meetings prior to the Board meetings. The Board engages in work sessions prior to Board meetings to learn more about campus processes, initiatives, and policies, and to support the work of the faculty and staff across campus.

**Focus on Student Success and the Students.** At the Board's request, a student presents his or her success story at every Board meeting in order to keep the focus on "what matters most," students. Additionally, Board members are active in their student advocacy, whether serving as mentors for students, supporting scholarships, or putting into place policies that reflect Clark State's commitment to its students. A good example of this is the Board's championing of the Tuition Challenge Program, a rebate program for students who move to full-time status and maintain a specific GPA. Should these students enroll full-time, they will receive a 10% discount on their tuition for that semester.

**Attendance and Collegiality.** In the last five years, Clark State's Board added a Governance Committee to monitor Board attendance and ensure the engagement of each member with the whole Board and on committees. Additionally, Clark State Board members have made a commitment to be present at College events to support the faculty, staff, and students, such as Phi Theta Kappa inductions, Athletic Banquet, Student Recognition Night, Scholarship Luncheons, and various events throughout the year that showcase student success. It is rare that students know their College Board of Trustees' members, but this is the rule at Clark State due to their visibility at events and support of students.

**Strategic Planning.** The Board leads, reviews, and approves the college's Strategic Plan. The president and her Executive Council report regularly on progress on the plan at Board meetings and events. The Board takes the mission, vision, and guiding principles of the college to heart, and codifies these documents in policy form. The Strategic Plan guides the budgeting and planning processes at the College as well, and this guidance was requested by the Board in consultation with the President and Vice President for Business Affairs.

**Diversity and Equity.** The Board, with the President, sets high level diversity and equity goals for the college to ensure that Clark State is recruiting, employing, and retaining top talent—both employees and students—that is reflective of the diverse communities we serve. The Board and President also set goals regarding diversity and equity as part of the President's incentive plan. One example of a goal includes minority student course completion and retention goals. By 2020, the Board set a target for minority course completion at 70%. Clark State achieved a 73% course

(continued on page 4)

## EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

Since community colleges today are under significant public scrutiny, the associated stresses on presidents and boards to respond effectively and make tough choices can sometimes lead to disagreements about priorities. Yet, effective governance demands a strong and healthy relationship between the community college president and board chair. In fact, it has been claimed that the president-board chair relationship perhaps is the key connection that drives governance effectively. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Sean L. Huddleston, MEd, EdS

Vice President for Inclusion and Equity  
University of Indianapolis  
Indianapolis, Indiana

For institutions of higher education, a strong and productive relationship between the president and the chair of the board of trustees is critical for their mutual success. Scholars note that strong board chair-president relationships culminate into productive interactions and involvement from governing boards, whereas flawed relationships can lead to major institutional disruptions. Consequently, much of the published research on the relationship between higher education presidents and their respective boards of trustees appears to focus on two primary areas of concentration. One area focuses on the role of lay boards in higher education governance, and the other area of focus relates to the importance of the relationship between the president and the board of trustees. On the latter, scholars seem to agree that the relationship between presidents and board chairs not only determine how an institution is governed but also how well it is governed. For community colleges, this is especially important. As these institutions play a significant role in college attainment and regional workforce development, it is imperative that presidents and board chairs work in partnership for these institutions to successfully achieve their mission.

There are many facets to the relationship between the community college president and board chair, with some factors being more critical than others. Accordingly, I believe the ability to build and maintain effective relationships between community college presidents and their respective board chairs is highly dependent on the following three components:

**Trust and Communication.** The relationship between presidents and their board chairs must be enshrined in trust. Presidents and board chairs must gain and maintain the full confidence in each other in order to engender their respective support and engagement. Likewise, they must also maintain good communication with each other, which should include regularly scheduled discussions to ensure alignment on key issues.

**Shared Vision.** Presidents and board chairs must achieve a shared vision for the institution, and work together to promote institutional priorities that are mission driven. New ideas should be jointly agreed upon and introduced by the president and board chair, ensuring that they are guided by the values that are expressed and maintained by the board.

**Respect for Each Other's Role.** Board chairs must allow presidents to lead the day-to-day management of institution and avoid interfering with her/his ability to serve in that capacity. This includes making sure that trustees are deferring to the president for administrative issues. Likewise, presidents must acknowledge the board chair's responsibility for leading the institution's governing board. The board chair ensures that the board is effective in attending to its fiduciary and governance responsibilities, and any concerns of the public. Accordingly, presidents must respect the board chair's role in this regard.

Sean L. Huddleston, MEd, EdS, serves as Vice President for Inclusion and Equity at the University of Indianapolis. He has previously held diversity leadership positions with Framingham State University and Grand Valley State University, as well as with major corporations and non-profit organizations. He earned his MEd and EdS degrees from Grand Valley State University, is a Cornell University Certified Diversity Advanced Practitioner, and is currently enrolled in the DCCL program.



### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**What factors are critical in building and supporting a highly effective community college president/board chair relationship?**

### Evelyn M. Seiler, MS

Coordinator of Internship & Apprenticeship Programs  
McHenry County College  
Crystal Lake, Illinois

The community college president and board chair have a complicated relationship. The board chair is simultaneously the president's confidant and boss. The president both reports to the board and sets the direction for the college in conjunction with the board. To be effective, this collaborative relationship

needs trust and respect. These aspects are interrelated and consequential. The best way to establish and maintain a solid foundation is for the president and board chair to meet regularly to build that foundational relationship and to understand how they will work together. They need to have a mutual understanding about their respective roles and expectations (AGB, 2014). The expectations for the president are reinforced by the board through the president's annual priorities which are approved by the board and assessed in the president's annual review. The board chair is responsible for ensuring the board members fulfill the expectations of governing responsibly and do not overstep their governing role into micromanaging the college.

As partners in community college leadership, they need to be able to have frank discussions about the difficult issues facing the college, thoughtfully and robustly consider the possible solutions without reservation, and consider the concerns of other stakeholders. The board chair acts as wise counsel for the president; the board chair does not make decisions for the board (Schwartz, 2017). Trust is an intrinsic factor to moving an initiative forward or choosing a different direction. It is essential that each share relevant information and their honest opinion. The board needs to be able to trust that the president will guide their college with respect and integrity, will deliver on the expectations set forth in their priorities, and will make decisions in the best interest of the college. Respect is demonstrated by the president's and board chair's actions toward each other and the college, meeting the expectations established early on, and respectfully disagreeing and questioning each other when necessary. Each is the most trusted, strategic partner of the other (Mitchell & King, 2018).

In building and maintaining trust and respect, there should be no surprises between the board chair and the president (Schwartz, 2017). The board chair is the first person with whom the president shares ideas, gauging the climate of the full board through these initial discussions before sharing more broadly. Open and honest communication is necessary to this relationship. When and how information is communicated matters. News of any sort should be communicated directly and immediately between the president and board chair before it appears in the media. Prioritizing each other demonstrates their understanding that they are responsible to each other and the community for the well-being and reputation of the college.

#### References:

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Evelyn M. Seiler, MS serves as the Coordinator of Internship and Apprenticeship Programs at McHenry County College in Crystal Lake, Illinois. She has been working in community colleges for 12 years and was responsible for board support for nine years, where her interest in community college governance originated. She earned her MS from Benedictine University, Lisle, Illinois, and is currently pursuing her doctorate in the Ferris State University DCCL program.



## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Since community colleges today are under significant public scrutiny, the associated stresses on presidents and boards to respond effectively and make tough choices can sometimes lead to disagreements about priorities. Yet, effective governance demands a strong and healthy relationship between the community college president and board chair. In fact, it has been claimed that the president-board chair relationship perhaps is the key connection that drives governance effectively. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### The Board Chair/President Relationship: The Heart of a Well-Functioning College

**J. Noah Brown, MPP**

President and CEO

Association of Community College Trustees

Washington, D.C.

Boards and presidents have shared responsibilities **but very different roles**. When roles are well-understood and executed, particularly between board chairs and presidents, colleges enjoy progress and leadership powered to address the challenges and multiplicity of demands from students and the community. As a foundation, it must be understood that the relationship between a president and board is one of employer-to-employee—grounded both legally and ethically, embodying mutual respect and support. Neither side should publicly disparage the other, nor should the parties seek to undermine their respective authorities.

**The Board.** The board governs the college or district and draws strength and legitimacy from its community connections, regardless of whether trustees are appointed or elected. Boards focus on the entire community's needs and how the college best

advances those needs holistically, without falling prey to any one specific interest, constituency, or political allegiance. Boards set policy and the framework that underpins operations and functionality. They monitor performance against policy, assess implementation, and keep an eye on institutional performance relative to accrediting standards and applicable laws and regulations. Boards are the "keepers of the flame"—they establish a common or shared vision, practice goal-setting, and use their policy authority to keep the institution grounded in the mission and to the ownership that is pouring resources into the college.

**The Board Chair.** Each board of trustees elects a board chair who is empowered to speak for the board and to serve as the board's principal conduit and counsel to the president. The chair position is charged with specific responsibilities not held by other board members. In addition to serving a facilitating role during board meetings, guiding the board through its agenda and setting the tone of the meeting, the board chair holds a variety of special duties, including leading the board and setting board priorities, drafting agendas, coordinating the president's annual performance review, in some cases serving as the sole media and otherwise public-facing representative of the board of trustees, and other specific responsibilities.

**The President.** The president is responsible for the overall administration of board policy, goals, and priorities. Working through the institution, the president maintains relationships through his or her leadership and uses administrative skills to inspire institutional quality and adherence to mission. Presidents implement the policies of the board, oversee day-to-day operations of the college, and work with their boards on maintaining forward momentum and progress.

**Board Chair and President Team.** At the heart of well-functioning institutions is the relationship between the board chair and the president. Board chairs should be accessible to the president and the first phone call when issues arise that the president needs to bring forth to the Board. Similarly, the board chair should speak frankly and expeditiously with the president when concerns or questions arise from board members. The relationship must be based on trust, mutual support, and respect. Presidents invest considerable professional capital in their institutions; board chairs and board members put their community standings and integrity on the line—it is a relationship

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*What factors are critical in building and supporting a highly effective community college president/board chair relationship?*

*The relationship must be based on trust, mutual support, and respect.*

that can only function when honesty and respect are paramount. It is marriage made whole through mutual commitment and careful nurturing, and through a shared desire to succeed. Just as it is vital for the board chair and the president to understand their respective roles and their joint relationship, it is vital for the full board to understand and respect this special relationship, and to trust the chair and the president to fulfill their responsibilities together without undue interference from board members who are not charged with the responsibilities of the chair.

**Board Chair/President Relationship is "Give and Take."** Board chairs keep the board on task and provide appropriate information flow between the president and the entire board. Board members have a responsibility to stay informed by sharing information and to discuss and debate issues openly and honestly. Through the board chair, rank-and-file board members constitute the larger sounding board for the president and should address matters of policy and progress without personalizing. The board chair should ensure

that individual board members are not second-guessing the president's decision and that the president is providing clear and relevant information to the Board to guide deliberation and decision making.

The board chair encourages courageous conversations with the board and provides "air cover" to the president to administer and execute tough decisions throughout the institution with the support of the board. Boards and presidents should endeavor to subscribe to the "no surprises rule"—critical information and other issues of import must be shared as soon as possible and without prejudice or recrimination until all the facts are known and the opportunity provided to follow relevant policies and procedures.

**Common-Sense Rules.** As with any relationship, mutual support lies at the heart of every well-functioning board/president relationship. Boards invest considerable time, money, and public capital when they hire a president. They should endeavor to play their parts in protecting and nurturing that investment by understanding their responsibilities as employers and community stewards. The board chair must be sure to engage the board annually in evaluation, benchmarking, and goal setting for both the board and the president. Boards and presidents must work in partnership with and understand, accept, and zealously adhere to their respective roles and authorities. While this seems like common sense to the observer, actual practice sometimes devolves into blurring of lines and overstepping of boundaries. We too often read about these examples in the press. The science of governance is straightforward; its execution takes practice, commitment, and the unselfish desire toward institutional excellence.

*J. Noah Brown is a widely recognized and award-winning higher education policy and governance expert, author, and educator whose experience spans more than three decades in the nation's capital working in the nonprofit sector. Noah has served as president and chief executive officer of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) since 2005 and has worked for the association since 1996. He also serves on the faculty for the Doctorate in Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University in Michigan. Noah's inaugural book, *First in the World: Community Colleges and America's Future*, won the 2013 Bellwether Book Award. Noah holds a BA from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the MPP degree from the University of Maryland, College Park, and an Honorary Associate of Arts from Atlantic Cape Community College in New Jersey.*



**QUICK TAKES**  
**Highlights**  
**from the Field**

**Consequential Boards:**  
**Adding Value Where It**  
**Matters Most**

by **National Commission**  
**on College and University**  
**Board Governance**

Today, higher education institutions face the imperative to approach governance from an expanded perspective. Board-president relationships are critical to the strengthening of public trust in the ability of institutions to make choices that contribute to the public well-being. This report offers seven recommendations aimed at boards and presidents in support of the distinct role only they can play in improving institutional value through more effective governance.  
<https://bit.ly/2rvGxuX>

**The President-Board**  
**Chair Relationship:**  
**Making It Work,**  
**Making It Count**

by **the AGB**  
Given that a strong relationship between the board chair and college president is crucial when it comes to effective governance, a panel of AGB consultants and members of AGB's board brings together decades of first-hand experience relative to the board chair/president relationship. The panel explores why this relationship is so important and what makes it work most effectively, along with sharing insights gained as advisers to dozens of different institutions.  
<https://bit.ly/2M9RteK>



Published by the Alliance for Community College Excellence in Practice, Ferris State University, Doctorate in Community College Leadership Big Rapids, Michigan

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**Effective, Engaged, and Energized...** (continued from page 1)

completion percentage in spring 2018, 10% higher than the original 2017 benchmark, which was 63%. Because the Board was committed to moving the needle on diversity, we were able to realize these gains together and the campus recognized the importance of the Board's focus.

**Shared Governance.** The Board of Trustees is strongly dedicated to shared governance, and follows a modified version of the Carver Policy Governance Model. Additionally, the Board hears reports from the chairs of the Faculty, Staff, and Student Senates at every Board meeting. Having an open and regular line of communication with all campus stakeholders has built trust on campus and demonstrated to the campus community that the Board listens and acts.

**Community and Legislative Advocacy.** The Board of Trustees strongly advocates for students at the state and federal levels, through organizations such as the Ohio Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees. One example of federal advocacy is the Board's vocal support for Pell Grants, including access to Pell for short-term certificates through the Jumpstart Our Businesses by Supporting Students (JOBS) Act, with our Senators and Congressmen.

**Clark State is committed to recognizing the achievements of our trustees and President at the local, regional, and national levels.**

**Professional Development.** The Clark State Board of Trustees has prioritized professional development. Board members regularly present statewide and nationally on topics ranging from Ohio's 100% Performance Based Funding Model, Conceal and Carry Policies, and Mentorship. Board members – often all of our Board members—attend the Association of Community College Trustees' Leadership Congress and Legislative Summits, as well as the Ohio Association of Community Colleges' meetings. Several trustees have served nationally on ACCT committees, and one trustee serves on the OACC's Executive Committee. Their commitment to staying informed about policies and legislation at the state and national level has allowed them to make informed decisions as trustees at Clark State. Finally, Board members attend an annual Clark State Board retreat.

**Celebration and Recognition.** Clark State is committed to recognizing the achievements of our trustees and President at the local, regional, and national levels. The AACC Board Relations award is one example of these recognitions. In addition, annually, the OACC awards an Ohio Trustee the Maureen C. Grady Award for Special Achievement. This award was named after a former Clark State Board of Trustee Chair, and is awarded to trustees who have demonstrated extraordinary leadership throughout the term of their service and those who have made outstanding professional contributions to their college or to community colleges as a whole. Within the last three years, two current Clark State trustees have been honored with this award. Clark State's Board was also honored in 2017 as the President's Assistant was awarded the ACCT Board Professional Award of Excellence.

**Fiscal Oversight.** Perhaps the primary role of the Board of Trustees is financial oversight of the college. Clark State's Board is strategic in investing in student success initiatives and balancing these investments with a conservative fiscal approach that ensures careful stewardship of tax dollars. The Trustees and President have been strong financial stewards, with healthy financial reserves, conservative budgeting, and

**Trust and integrity—and transparency—are the underpinnings of any successful college board.**

a college foundation that represents strong donor support. The Board and President made sound decisions regarding capital projects that contribute to retention and success, with a current focus on renovating older classrooms and other vital amenities to improve learning experiences. Finally, the trustees have been influential in Clark State's push for safety, updating and creating important safety and risk management policies and implementing college-wide safety trainings with funding received from the State of Ohio.

**Trust and Integrity.** Trust and integrity—and transparency—are the underpinnings of any successful college board. Annually in the spring, the Board of Trustees performs a 360-degree evaluation on themselves and the President. This Board self-assessment, President's evaluation, and goals are discussed at the June Board meeting. Evaluation measures include Leadership/Institutional Performance, External Relations/Corporate and Community Service Outreach, Budgetary/Fiscal Management, Relations with Governing Board, and Community Cultivation/Fundraising. Each Board member also does an individual self-evaluation that addresses their strength at upholding Board and institutional policies, values, and performance. The Board of Trustees completes ethics training annually with the guidance of the Attorney General's Office. The Board and President are working to set equity goals by examining employee training, pay, benefits, and student access, and strengthening HR, financial aid, and Title IX policies.

Clark State's Board of Trustees and President work collaboratively within a shared governance system and with external stakeholders to provide access to higher education and improve student success. The benefits of a strong, energized, committed, and responsive Board go beyond significant increases in state funding or grant dollars—the benefits are the increases in student completion and graduation.

**Jo Alice Blondin, PhD,** became the fifth president of Clark State Community College in 2013. Prior to Clark State, Dr. Blondin served as Chancellor of Arkansas Tech University – Ozark. She holds a PhD from Arizona State University and her MA from Arizona State University. Her national, regional, and local service strengthens Clark State's responsiveness to workforce and community needs. To that end, Dr. Blondin serves as President of the National Council for Workforce Education and on the boards of the Higher Learning Commission and the American Association of Community Colleges. She also serves on the boards of the Dayton Chamber of Commerce, and the Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce.



**Sharon M. Evans, MBA,** Clark State Community College Board of Trustees Chairperson, has served on the Board for 13 years and is committed to supporting and furthering the goals of the College in providing quality education at an affordable price. She earned her MBA from Central Michigan University and is a Retired Air Force Deputy Director of Contracting Enterprise Information Systems. Her community service involvement includes serving as vice chair of the Greater Grace Temple Board of Trustees, director of Greater Grace Christian Counseling Program, past president and member of the Springfield Chapter of Links, and past president of Central State Springfield Ohio Alumni Association.

