

THE MAKING OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEE: CHAPTER SEVEN

A SHOCKING LOSS OF LEADERSHIP PRESENTS UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES FOR THE BOARD.

BY EDUARDO MARTI

THE POST-COVID SEMESTER STARTED WELL AT FILMORE COMMUNITY COLLEGE. President Al Pendleton's plan to enhance counseling and provide professional development to faculty members was received with enthusiasm by all college constituencies. The August retreat brought all board members up to date, and the union negotiations concluded satisfactorily. The only major ongoing concerns were graduation and retention rates. The September meeting of the board went smoothly, and trustee Pam Schier left the meeting feeling that the college was in good shape. The fall semester proceeded without any major crisis. Then came the bombshell.

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President Pendleton called Board Chair Chuck Frazier to let him know that he had accepted another position and that he would be leaving at the end of the academic year. Frazier called for an emergency meeting of the executive committee to determine what to do.

After calling the meeting to order, Frazier immediately called for an executive session “to discuss a personnel matter.” Vice Chair Matthew Fleming seconded the chair’s motion. There are four members of the Executive Committee: Frazier, Fleming, Finance Committee Chair Celestina Rodriguez, and Schier, who is chair of the personnel committee.

“I have the difficult task of informing you,” Frazier said, “that President Pendleton has accepted the position of President of Kennebunkport Community College in Maine. His last day at Filmore will be June 30.” He waited for the news to sink in. The members of the executive committee were totally surprised.

“Did you know that he was looking for another position?” asked Schier.

“No, I did not,” Frazier responded. “I need let you to know that he has a three-year contract and that he is in his second year.”

“Wait a second. Not so fast. He can’t get away with this,” said Fleming. “We should ask that he give us more time to search.”

Schier echoed Fleming’s sentiment, saying, “Look, I run a business and I enter into contracts all the time. If I want to get out of a contract, there is always an exit clause. I don’t remember seeing such a clause in Pendleton’s contract. Why should we let him renege on his commitment to us without some sort of penalty?”

Frazier appeared unsettled. “And what do you suppose we do, Pam? We can’t force him to stay, and we can’t ask him for money we have not given him. And if we could force him to stay, we would have an unhappy CEO, and he could do some damage to the progress we have made during his tenure. He has been with us for seven years,

and he has done a good job. I would recommend that we release him from his contract and begin a search for his replacement immediately.”

After much discussion, it was agreed to let President Pendleton go and to start a new search.

President Pendleton’s decision was announced at the September board meeting, and it was big news in town. Frazier announced the formation of a search committee and appointed Schier as the chair of the committee. The search committee was composed of three faculty members elected by their peers, three members of the administration elected by all staff members, and the president of the student council.

The day following the meeting, Schier called ACCT, the national Association of Community College Trustees, to have a consultant help with the search. During the month of January, the ACCT consultant guided the board in creating an effective advertisement for the position and determining the criteria for selection of a candidate qualified to lead a dynamic, modern community college. The ads were placed in the appropriate print and online publications. The responses were screened by ACCT for minimum qualifications, and qualified responses were sent to the search committee members electronically.

The first in-person meeting of the search committee took four hours. Sifting through the resumes, matching them to the criteria, and then assigning weight to the matches resulted in narrowing down the pool to eight semifinalists. Virtual video interviews were scheduled by the consultant and questions were formulated to be used during the interviews. By the end of March, the search committee had narrowed the candidates to four finalists. Each of the four was asked to participate in an in-person interview during the month of April. Careful notes were taken by the ACCT consultant, and two finalists were selected by May 1.

The two finalists were invited to come to campus and meet with different constituencies for an entire day. Both

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met separately with the board at a special meeting. The input from the college community was considered by the board along with the result of the interviews.

The board decided unanimously to make an offer to Dr. Sabrina Morgan. The candidate was vetted and all references were checked. All the reports were glowing. She had attended Howard University and held a Ph.D. in sociology. Previously, Dr. Morgan had served as vice president for academic affairs at East Alabama Community College. She was a good fit for Filmore. Chuck met with her and the two came to an agreement on the terms of the contract and the salary offer.

After graduation in May and all the parties celebrating the seven-year tenure of Dr. Pendleton, Dr. Morgan assumed the office on July 1.

Having established a good relationship with the ACCT staff, Schier clearly understood that the process does not end with the appointment. A board retreat was scheduled for August, and Schier suggested to Frazier that the board use this time to establish clear short- and long-term goals for Dr. Morgan and that these goals be used later in the year to determine the progress made toward completion. In this manner, the board set parameters for the new president and at the same time provided Dr. Morgan with the necessary latitude to operate within these parameters during the difficult first year. The retreat went smoothly, and the board used the college's strategic plan to extract achievable goals for Dr. Morgan's first year. Also, as this was Dr. Morgan's first presidency, Pam suggested that a coach be employed to assist her during the transition. Dr. Morgan felt supported and welcomed the clarification of her duties.

Schier became the liaison between the board and Dr. Morgan. As the first year went by, it became clear that the choice had been a great one. Schier and the board once again felt that the college was going in a good direction.

Schier was having her coffee on a bright and sunny spring morning when she got a phone call from Dr. Morgan. "Hello, Pam, this is Sabrina. I just called to let you know that I was informed this morning that Chuck Frazier had a massive heart attack and died at 5:30 a.m. I am very sorry to have to inform you of his demise. I know how close you were and how you work so well together."

Questions for the Board:

1. Do you think that Schier was correct in her assessment of the terms of the presidential contract? If so, what could the board have done?
2. Does the process used in searching for Dr. Morgan seem reasonable? What, if any, modifications would you propose if you were in the Filmore Community College board's position?
3. Was the onboarding process for President Morgan adequate? Do you use a similar model at your college?
4. What should Schier and the rest of the board do in immediate response to the loss of their long-experienced board chair? Does your college have a succession plan for board and executive leadership?
5. What can the board do to ensure that the college is run smoothly while making up for the loss of important institutional history following the loss of two longtime leaders and simultaneously grieving?



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