

TRUSTEE Advocacy in Action

WRITING AN OPINION ARTICLE FOR LOCAL MEDIA IS AN IMPORTANT WAY TO SHARE OUR INSTITUTIONS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

BY BERNIE RHINERSON

IN APRIL OF EACH YEAR, WE CELEBRATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE Month as a time when all of us who are passionate about the amazing work being done in our colleges can share it broadly with our community. As community college trustees, we have a responsibility not only to represent the interests of our community on our boards, but also to be spokespeople for the contributions that our colleges are making to serve students from our community.

Community college trustees are seen as “experts” who are well qualified to share and explain the many accomplishments of our colleges to guide our students toward successful careers. That means your local media outlets are always interested in having you share information about interesting community college programs in your community. Yes, that is what your college public information officers do, but there is added credibility to the story and the message when it comes from an elected or appointed trustee on a community college board.

Writing an opinion article about a unique or interesting college program is easier than you may think. And getting that story published in local community media outlets is also easier than it sounds. During my nine years as a trustee, I have had several articles published in San Diego media highlighting everything from the success of our high school dual-enrollment programs to our many entrepreneurial education programs. And once published, the exposure value of these articles gets multiplied over and over through social media posts and reposts.

Here are four easy steps to follow to write and publish your first community college opinion article.

Step #1: Use a Recent Board Meeting Report as Your Source Material.

One of the most rewarding things about being a community college trustee is hearing monthly board reports about successful educational programs in our colleges. At every board meeting, our board hears about unique programs that are positively impacting our students and helping them move forward to degrees and certificates that will get them started in successful careers. As a college trustee, I love being able to share these stories with people I meet in my community.

You can take those stories to the next level by using a board report to create a short 500-to-800-word article that you can send to the local media. Our board reports are usually in the form of easy-to-understand PowerPoint slides. Each slide typically is filled with key points about the program and data on student success. You can easily use those key points and data to craft an article, adding your own insights and thoughts.

At our April 2021 meeting, our board heard a report about open educational resources (OER) and lowering textbook costs for students. That report was filled with positive data that would make a great article for any trustee to write and share with the community, like how we achieved more than \$3 million dollars of districtwide textbook savings for our students!

Step #2: Don't Think You Are A Writer? Lean on Your PIO or College President for Help.

OK, so maybe you don't see yourself as a writer, or you may have never done any writing like this before. Don't be intimidated! Your college's public information officer (PIO) or your college president are probably more than willing to help if you express an interest in doing this kind of positive advocacy for your college.

Whenever I get inspired to write an article, I start with Step #1 for my inspiration and just sit down at my computer and translate an interesting board report into sentences to tell the same story that I heard at the board meeting. But my next step is always to email my draft to our chancellor, my board president, and our PIO for comment and input. They have always been happy to read it over and suggest edits and additions. Our PIO also always has suggestions on how to get it published. Remember, as board members we are part of a team, and we should never surprise our board colleagues or college president by submitting an article without sharing it with them first.

Still feeling challenged? You may want to ask your college president if your PIO has time to put a first draft together for you, and then you can edit and add your thoughts to that draft.

Step #3: Getting Published. Yes, the Media is Interested in What Trustees Have to Say.

Over the last two decades, a digital revolution has changed media as we used to know it. Today, news lives online, not just on paper delivered to our driveways. This digital revolution has created more opportunities to get opinion articles published because of the unlimited space available on community news websites. Think beyond the big Sunday opinion pages in your local legacy "newspaper" and explore publication opportunities in other online news sites.

I always try to place my articles in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, which has the largest regional audience, but it often has space limits or sometimes is not interested in the topic. I usually place a call to the opinion page editor or just email it in. But if you get rejected by your local "big" newspaper, don't give up. Ask your PIO for help on how to submit your article to a local online news source.

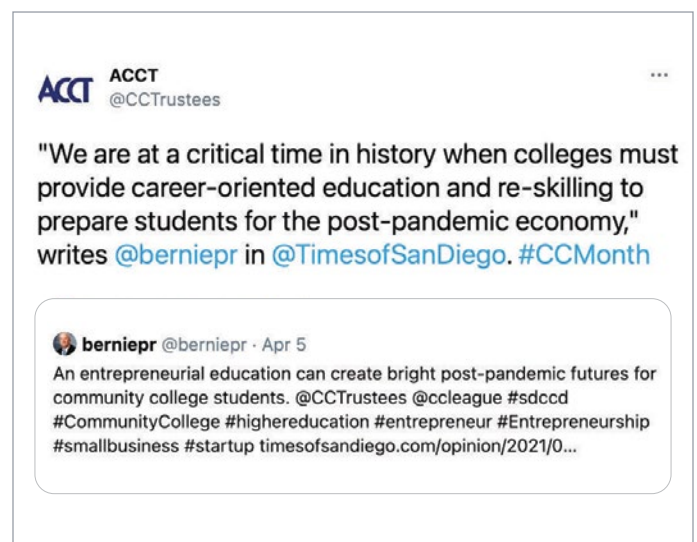
In San Diego, I have had excellent results with our local online news site, *Times of San Diego*, which recently published my article on entrepreneurial education programs at our community colleges. Getting the article published was simple: I emailed it to the editor, who loves getting content for his site. He quickly accepted it and posted my article.

Step #4: Expand Your Exposure with Social Media.

Once you get your article published, the fun part begins — circulating it to gain positive exposure for your college programs. With social media, you can dramatically increase the

number of people who see your article and read it to learn more about your colleges. And with social media, even having people just see the positive headline will have an impact.

Once I get the link to my published article, I immediately share it via my personal Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. I make sure to tag my district's social media feeds, #sdccd and @sdccd, so that it will be seen by their large audience of followers. I also tag ACCT social media (@CCTrustees) and our state association (@cleague). By tagging your social media post, you can expand the exposure, like this retweet by ACCT:



I encourage all of my fellow community college trustees to become writers as a way to be an active advocate for our students and our colleges. Follow these four steps to write your first article to get your college success stories told in your local media, from your perspective as a board member. If you are interested in trying to write an article, just ask your president or PIO for some help. They know that with your credibility as a trustee, you can be a powerful messenger to share the many positive stories about your college's programs and students.

Don't be shy. The media will be happy to hear from you, and your community will appreciate learning about how your community college is building bright futures for students in your community.



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