

What Trustees Can – and Should – Do to Support New Presidents

A board leader and college president share how onboarding and development set the stage for long-term success.

By Lawrence A. Nespoli and Deborah E. Preston

IN THE WINTER ISSUE OF *TRUSTEE QUARTERLY*, GEORGE Boggs and Maria Sheehan delivered an important message to trustees about protecting the physical and mental health of their presidents. In their words, “hiring a president is the most significant investment a board can make for its college. Trustees need to ensure they are supported.”

These observations are especially true for new presidents. It seems to us that there are things that boards of trustees can and should do to support the professional development and onboarding of their new presidents while at the same time supporting and nurturing their personal health.

We believe this special focus on new presidents is important for several reasons. We agree wholeheartedly with those who have observed that the president’s first year often sets the stage for the president’s long-term success. And it’s also important to note that in any given five-year period, about half of current community college presidents anticipate retiring or moving on to their next presidency. Both reinforce the point that supporting new presidents is especially important.

At Mercer County Community College, Two Views of Supporting New Leaders

Mercer County Community College (MCCC) in New Jersey hired a new president in the summer of 2022. One of the co-authors of this article is vice chair of the board of trustees and also served on the presidential search committee; the other is the president who is now entering the third year of her first presidency.

We offer two different but complimentary perspectives on ways to support new presidents — the trustee lens and the president’s point of view.

We should also note that when MCCC was finding its new president, several new trustees were appointed, and new officers were elected. Relatedly, state legislation was enacted requiring new trustees to complete a trustee orientation program.

The Trustee Lens: Resetting the Commitment to Being a Policy-Driven Board

Bringing on a new president and many new trustees at the same time presented an important opportunity to reset and reinforce the board’s commitment to serving as a policy-driven board while empowering the president to run the day-to-day operations of the college in the ways that CEOs are expected to do. We did this in several important ways.

- **President’s Contract** – The initial employment contract is a good place to show strong support for the president from day one. To that end, we included contract language on coaching services for the president, attendance at professional meetings and seminars, and a strong annual evaluation process based on clearly stated goals each year. And with a nod to the increasing political activism on some college campuses, we also included language to preserve the nonpartisan nature of the president’s office by making clear that the president would neither make political contributions nor attend political fundraising events.
- **Code of Ethics** – With the appointment of so many new trustees, it was also a good time to strengthen our trustee code of ethics. We reviewed many similar codes of ethics from other community colleges plus national models provided by ACCT and others. Perhaps most importantly, we added new enforcement language that requires all trustees to annually sign and return a statement to the board secretary affirming their intention to comply with the code of ethics. And if violations of the code occur, the board will consider removing a trustee as an officer of the board, as chair of a committee, or from committee assignments altogether — or even recommend to the appointing authority that the trustee be removed from the board.
- **Trustee Bylaws** – One of the most important policies that a board of trustees has is its own bylaws. A full review of our trustee bylaws, which had not been done in years, is now underway.
- **Policy on Policies** – We also recently approved another key board



policy, a new “policy on policies” that outlines how policies are developed and brought to the board for approval.

- Policy Manual – Finally, a full review of the board’s policy manual where all board policies (and related procedures) are compiled is similarly underway.

The President’s Lens: Working with the Board to Build a Strong Team

With the new president’s arrival, the board and the president immediately began to collaborate on building a strong relationship — between the president and the board, as well as strengthening the relationships among trustees. We did this in several important ways.

- Board Retreat(s) – In her first official act as MCCC’s new president (even before she began her employment at the college), our new president worked with board officers to plan a board retreat to take place soon after her arrival. Working with a consultant from ACCT, we were able to design a retreat that allowed the board and the president to begin our relationship with common goals and expectations. Board retreats have been held annually since then.
- President’s Evaluation – With a first-time president, a new board chair, and many new trustees, we started with a clean slate for the president’s evaluation and agreed on a collaborative approach. The chair of the board’s human resources committee researched best practices (including materials published by ACCT), the board chair drew on past experiences with other organizations, and our new president reached out to fellow presidents who shared evaluation approaches that had worked for them. Throughout this process, open communication ensured that all parties were comfortable with an evaluation process that resulted in a meaningful review.
- Preparation for Successful Reaccreditation – Having taken the helm as president in July knowing that MCCC’s reaccreditation visit was scheduled for the following April, our new president made preparations for a successful reaccreditation a high priority for the college community and the board. For the board, this meant

educating members on the process, reviewing key findings from the self-study, and explaining the high stakes involved. We were able to accomplish all of these objectives, primarily through a series of small-group sessions for all board members.

Concluding Observations

The actions taken by the Mercer County Community College board of trustees and its new president are shared here as a menu of possibilities that other boards and their new presidents might consider during the president’s first year.

Hiring a new president is one of the most important responsibilities a board of trustees will ever have. It can be a challenging time for the board and the college, but it is a moment of great opportunity as well.

Specifically, it is an opportunity for the board to revisit its governance structures and processes to better ensure that it is a policy-driven board that supports the president’s role in leading and managing the college. At the same time, the board should reexamine best practices like board retreats, the president’s evaluation, and its role in the college’s reaccreditation as ways to nurture strong relationships with the president and among trustees.

In the end, good governance structures and strong relationships both matter — and the hiring of a new president is an important opportunity to recommit to both.



Dr. Lawrence A. Nespoli is vice chair of the Board of Trustees at Mercer County Community College and former president of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges. Dr. Deborah E. Preston is president of Mercer County Community College.