

I have to admit, I'm a bit of a news hound when it comes to other colleges and their boards. I have a "news alert" set up on my email to give me the latest goings-on from other colleges in the state and beyond. I also volunteer with the Higher Learning Commission, the largest accreditor for higher education, and help them maintain accreditation standards as a peer reviewer.

I learn what others are doing right and perhaps a bit wrong so that I can apply that knowledge here. I figure that I'd rather learn from someone else's mistakes than from my own if I could help it, and by learning about other colleges and their leadership I'm doing just that.

In my readings and my travels I have seen a lot. Here are a few war stories.

War story #1: The college was overrun. It was bad. Hundreds of prairie dogs had taken up residence on campus of this small rural institution. The leadership and the Board of Trustees believed them to be important to the area so they were allowed to, shall we say, prosper on campus to the point that there was no grass left anywhere. It was all dirt, mounds, and holes. Everywhere.

And the sidewalks were their restrooms if you get my drift. Years before COVID masks were all the fashion, students at this institution would cover their noses and mouths walking between the buildings, especially on windy days to keep from breathing in the, ah, waste material. Students and employees asked the board for the prairie dogs to be relocated, but the trustees did not give in.

War story #2: A college board was fully aware that a member of their leadership team was involved in a possible sexual harassment case. But they were assured by the same leadership that it would be best if they just let a person directly involved in the allegation handle the investigation, you know, to keep it quiet.

War story #3: A college board member was a lawyer and decided to take on a client that wanted action against his own institution. So a board member essentially took legal action against his own college on behalf of a client.

Bad boards and bad board decisions are sadly not unheard of. One of the most "sanctioned" items for institutions by the Higher Learning Commission is in the area of governance. Boards that violate contracts, overstep their missions, get "sideways" with their own leadership team or other employees, fail to oversee their president, fiscally mismanage the college, or break state rules are all too common.

The average lifespan of a college president is about four years. Sometimes they leave to seek other opportunities, but sometimes it's due to poor board/CEO relationship. It is hard to have a 10 year plan if you have three different presidents in that 10 year period.

But fortunately, good boards are much more plentiful than bad ones, they just don't make the news. At Neosho County Community College we have one of the best boards! Why? It all starts with organization night.

Every year at the January Board of Trustees meeting we have organization night. Many items on the rest of the agenda are exciting or at least interesting, such as launching a new program, funding a renovation, hiring new people or hearing about grant award that brings new resources into the area. Organization night is not usually an exciting item to most people. But to me, it is one of my favorites for a good reason.

On organization night the Trustees name who is going to be Chair and Vice Chair. They say who the lawyer will be, where our money will be deposited, name the Clerk of the Board and other positions for the year and then set meeting day, time, and location. All pretty boring usually, but necessary.

And then at NCCC they do a remarkable thing that night. They read and sign the Affirmation of Service. Here it is:

*It is with the deepest sense of responsibility and conviction as a trustee of Neosho County Community College that I do solemnly affirm:*

*That I understand my authority exists only when acting collectively with my fellow board members, and that our authority is derived from, and obliged to serve, the interests of our entire community;*

*That I will exemplify ethical behavior and conduct that is above reproach;*

*That I will engage in an ongoing process of in-service education and continuous improvement;*

*That I will be prepared to participate in open, honest, and civil deliberation with my colleagues, vote my conscience rather than to advance any special interests, and support the decisions and policy we make;*

*and That I will honor the division of responsibility between the board and the CEO/President, and staff, and contribute to creating a spirit of true cooperation and a mutually supportive relationship in support of our community.*

This simple list of items, if followed, separate good boards from bad ones in my opinion. It's all in there: Speaking your mind in the meeting, but supporting the decisions made together; keep learning how to be a better board; ethical behavior above reproach; and understanding how your role is different from the president's role. But the first one on the list is perhaps the most important.

No one board member can do anything on their own. Only when acting together can anything be done. So they must cooperate to move the college forward. That last part always gets me, "...our authority is derived from, and obliged to serve, the interests of our entire community." Imagine if every elected person in the country said that out loud once a year and then took it to heart.

The members of the NCCC Board of Trustees do just that. They take their oath seriously, act together and serve the interests of the entire community.

And they hold me accountable as the CEO/President. I am evaluated yearly through data generated by our Institutional Effectiveness Dashboard, progress made on strategic planning, and through a board evaluation instrument and self-evaluation.

This six-member elected board is unpaid by the way. I can't even give them anything of value beyond a free pen that we give to everyone. So if you see them wearing an NCCC hat or polo, they bought that themselves from the bookstore. It is a large time commitment as well, that goes well beyond the one meeting a month you may be aware of. There are reports to read, training sessions, retreats, etc. It is a lot.

Why do they give up their time and take on this responsibility? They do it out of a sense of community and duty to our service area and to the college. I so appreciate their leadership, professionalism, and

support for our mission and for me. When I took the job as President I was warned by the outgoing president, "You think it was hard working for me, wait until you have six bosses to keep happy."

It's been almost eleven years now as president and I have to say my six bosses have been wonderful. They have challenged me, but also supported me, while keeping the mission first and foremost in their decisions. Thank you Chair Dennis Peters, Vice Chair Lori Kiblinger, David Peter, Kevin Berthot, Charlie Boaz, and Jenny Westerman for your continued service to our college!