

Community College Governance: Locally Elected Boards

A position paper by the
California Community Colleges Classified Senate

Since the passage of Proposition 13 (1978) the bilateral system of governance for the California Community Colleges has occasionally been debated. Both the appointed Board of Governors and locally elected Trustee Boards share the custodial responsibilities for the system. Should the group of individuals appointed by the Governor of California have sole authority to make all decisions regarding the funding, management and operations of all community colleges in the State? Or, should the Board of Governors simply provide independent districts with the funding and guidelines and then allow the locally elected trustee boards to continue with the governance of their own community colleges?

In 1921, when community colleges were legislatively authorized, they were created under a structure governed by locally elected trustees accountable to both local voters and the applicable laws of the State of California. The Education Code rewrite of 1959 provided that community colleges were to be governed by locally elected boards, provide the first two years of postsecondary education, and have the power to offer a curriculum that met the needs of the local community. The establishment of the *Master Plan for Higher Education in California* (1959) stated that community colleges should be community based and locally controlled with the State authorized to enforce legal provisions pertaining to the colleges. In 1967, the Legislature transferred statewide

responsibility for community colleges from the State Department of Education to the newly created Board of Governors and the Chancellor's Office. Then in 1978, Proposition 13 resulted in the Legislature playing an increased role in local community college governance and operations and triggered a series of significant funding shifts.

In 1985, the Board of Governors proposed that the interests of the public would be better served if they were given authority for statewide community college educational policy. This action resulted in the 1986 Commission for the Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, and the Joint Legislative Committee on the Master Plan was formed. The Commission ultimately recommended that the system be administered as a unified state/local system giving the Board of Governors broad policy making and management responsibilities for both academic and financial matters. However, the Commission made no recommendation to change the community college governance structure. Then in 1988, another study of the *Master Plan* was conducted and the Commission concluded that the basic governing structures of community colleges were not problematic, but that commitment and imagination within the structures were the key issues. In 1993, the Assembly Committee on Higher Education conducted yet another review of the *Master Plan* and again took no action regarding the governance structure.

Those who favor centralized State control argue that community colleges are operating under an incompatible structure in which the State pays the majority of the bills and local boards make the spending decisions. They cite the effect of Proposition 13 in shifting the responsibility for financing community colleges away from local taxpayers and onto statewide taxpayers, and therefore, argue that the State ultimately should say how the districts are run. Proponents of this approach argue that the current governance structure jeopardizes the college's ability to effectively meet the needs of its students due to the strong influence of employee unions on locally elected boards. They further argue that there are too many community college faculty members serving on elected boards, thus creating an environment which favors protecting employee privileges and rights over community and student needs.

Supporters of a bilateral governance structure believe that a stable governance framework that encourages local boards to address critical community needs and to ensure that wasteful duplication of programs and services is avoided will best serve student interests. In 1988, the U.S. Department of Education issued a major report on community colleges that shows evidence of support for local control,

As an institution with a primarily local focus, the community college is a vital hub for the development of human resources to support local business and industry. The typical community college curriculum is driven by academic and occupational programs and support services that target local economic and workforce development needs.

The undisputed success of community college districts in meeting the educational needs of their student population is due in part to locally elected trustees. Local board members are held responsible by the voters for ensuring that programs offered meet the needs of the community. They provide a local perspective and help create and reinforce a sense of community identity. Having local leadership insures that each district and college has an opportunity to build on its unique strengths, thereby insuring that there is enough diversity within the community college system to reflect the diversity throughout California. California has one of the most diverse populations in the world and our community colleges serve an incredibly diverse set of needs. Significant differences exist between rural, urban and suburban areas; between agricultural, industrial and technological economies; between depressed and growing economies; and between communities made up of old, young, multicultural, rich and poor.

As community representatives, locally elected board members also help build partnerships with local business to increase local sources of funding support. They build partnerships with other institutions and community organizations to collaborate in providing educational services, thereby using funds more effectively.

There are many key areas where locally elected trustee boards make an impact, not just on the way the districts are operated but on the students and the employees as well. In an effort to enhance the understanding of just how

important local boards are to the classified professionals working throughout the system, included are a few thoughts on their value. There is a need for local and State community college expertise working together to solve problems and provide leadership. The development of local leaders is the first step to supplying the system with statewide leaders. Ultimately, decisions need to be made close to the problems and within reach of the stakeholders while having support of the statewide system to back them up. Furthermore, local boards have the ability to embrace the concept of collegial governance as a fundamental policy of the college. The mechanism of participatory governance is enhanced by input at local board meetings by all constituency groups. Most local boards have a student trustee member who sits on the board and gives the local student perspective on issues. This further provides students the opportunity for enhanced leadership development. Employees are given the opportunity to address local issues and have input at board meetings for discussion and resolution. Another important role of the locally elected trustee board is the recognition of special programs and achievements that would be lost at higher levels, especially in regard to student achievement.

With classified staff, faculty, management and students working with local trustee boards a strong sense of group effort and responsibility is created. Working together at the local level all groups can more effectively share in the overall custodial role of maintaining and improving our districts. It is the combined role of employees and trustees to provide quality services to our students and our

communities. It is in reality a team effort. Local trustees can insure that we maintain that perspective and thereby succeed in directly and effectively serving our students and communities.

It is therefore, the position of the California Community Colleges Classified Senate that it is absolutely essential that a board of locally elected representatives exists to provide the bridge between community, district and local business insuring that local colleges are responsive to local needs. We believe that locally elected boards are held politically accountable by local voters for the achievements or lack thereof in their districts. Locally elected boards give campus constituents the best opportunity to participate effectively in governance by providing an arena for involvement and the expression of concerns and ideas. Locally elected boards bring the values of their communities to their colleges regarding programs, services and staffing. And finally, locally elected boards are better able to articulate the needs of the local communities and can work together with the Chancellor's office to represent the system at the state and federal levels. We need two coordinated, political bodies with the knowledge, skills and motivations to guide the system into the future.