Community college boards lose power, stature as system changes

Trustees shape districts’ goals and review policies, but don’t have control over revenues
by Erica Perez and Kendall Taggart — March 18, 2013, 12:00 a.m

The local community college district structure is in some ways a vestige of a different California.

The Little Hoover Commission, an independent state oversight agency, noted in a February 2012 report that the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 transferred control over revenues from local elected community college boards of trustees to the state, stripping governing boards of what some say was their essential power.

Local districts don’t set student fees; the Legislature does.

And while students used to need a permit to attend a community college in another district, since 1988, they’ve been free to attend any college in the state they choose, raising questions about the need for district boundaries at all.

A quarter of community college students attended colleges outside of their district in fall 2010, and more than 100,000 — about 7 percent — attended classes in multiple districts at the same time, according to state data.

Community college trustees are entrusted with making sure the districts meet the needs of the community. They help shape the district’s goals, and they review policies, sometimes updating or changing them — all in consultation with stakeholders such as faculty, staff and students.

Perhaps the most significant power local trustees hold is to hire — or fire — the district chancellor, who in turn is entrusted with recommending district policies. Trustees have the authority to approve or reject these proposed policies.

Most districts hold elections every two years for contested trustee positions. They also ask local voters to approve bond measures for construction or parcel taxes for additional services or classes. The districts must reimburse counties for the cost of these races. From 2006 to 2011, districts paid more than $30 million to reimburse counties for the cost of trustee elections alone.

Election results show voters care less about community college board races than they do about other contests. In November 2010, the Contra Costa Community College District’s Governing Board had two contested seats. But in both races, more than a quarter of eligible voters — nearly 35,000 — who cast ballots in the election chose not to vote at all on a trustee.

In September, the Field Poll surveyed 1,183 registered voters at the request of California Watch and found that 78 percent had little or no knowledge about district board elections. And while 46 percent of respondents said they think there is some value in having locally elected boards overseeing college districts, 63 percent said the districts should be consolidated if it saves money.

Pomona resident Dane Griffith, 48, one of the respondents to the Field Poll, said the number of districts should be reduced. He wondered what power boards have to help someone like his 18-year-old daughter, who couldn’t get into a single class this fall at Mt. San Antonio College.

“If you (have) more boards, is it going to be more effective, or is it going to add more gridlock or more expense?” Griffith said.
In all but a handful of districts, governing board members receive a small stipend for their service, ranging from $100 per month at the Mendocino-Lake Community College District to $2,000 per month at the Los Angeles Community College District.

The better perks are the district-paid health and welfare benefits offered to trustees. In some cases, just the trustees are covered; in other cases, they get coverage for dependents.

All but two of the state’s 72 community college districts – Cabrillo and Feather River – offer such benefits, and 84 percent of eligible trustees accept them. And it adds up. In 2011, districts paid more than $7 million in stipends and benefits for trustees.

In some cases, trustees opt in to the district-paid benefits even though they have jobs in the private sector. California Watch reviewed 16 community college districts and found that 41 of the 88 trustees receiving district-paid benefits in 2011 had jobs elsewhere.

The Mt. San Antonio Community College District paid $30,000 for board member Fred Chyr’s benefits in 2011, even though he has a full-time job as an associate vice president and chief marketing officer at the University of La Verne, a private four-year university. Chyr declined to comment for this story.

In Gary L. Woods’ case, the professor at Pasadena City College doubles as a board member for the Citrus Community College District. Woods gets health benefits from both districts. Pasadena paid about $16,000 last year, and Citrus paid about $17,000.

People with two health benefits policies can coordinate them so they pay less for their co-pays, deductibles and other out-of-pocket expenses. Both college districts pay 100 percent of premiums, so the extra coverage does not cost Woods anything.

Woods, who earned $148,000 at Pasadena City College last year, could have turned down one of the policies to save one of the districts money, but he didn’t consider that.

"Why would I?" he said. "We put a lot of time in. I don’t see what’s wrong with the practice."

An orientation guide for new trustees published by the Community College League of California estimates that trustees spend between two and 10 hours per week on trustee duties, such as reading materials and attending meetings. The league is a nonprofit advocacy organization whose members include district trustees and CEOs.

At Pasadena City College, board members and employees who opt out of the district-paid benefits can receive cash instead. Trustees Linda Wah and Anthony Fellow received $3,500 and $5,500 in cash, respectively, on top of their stipends in 2011 instead of certain health insurance benefits.

The district’s general counsel, Gail S. Cooper, said the district has to offer the same benefits to all participants. And all district employees have the option to receive cash instead of benefits if they show proof of insurance elsewhere.

She said district officials do not believe, however, that they have to offer health benefits to attract qualified trustees.

"Our trustees serve because they are dedicated to public higher education and student success," she said in an email. "The dedication of the members of our Board of Trustees is not motivated by receipt of this modest benefit."
Until the 1990s, community college board members could receive lifetime district-paid benefits after they left the board. California law now prohibits this for board members elected after January 1995, but some districts still are paying benefits to a few retired board members who were grandfathered in.

In its February 2012 report, the Little Hoover Commission said it ultimately saw great value in the role of local boards to advocate for their communities, despite the erosion of local control over the years.

The commission advocated keeping local boards while creating a stronger, more independent California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office to set priorities for the system. However, the commission also said college districts — especially small ones — could be more efficient if they combined administrative functions and coordinated more class offerings.

Advocates of local governing boards say the amount spent on trustee elections and salaries represents a tiny line item in the system's $10 billion budget. They also question whether a district could cater to its local communities as aptly without a board of trustees in that area.

Bill Elliott, president of the board of trustees for the Feather River Community College District in Quincy, wondered whether a Sacramento-based board of trustees would have seen the value in establishing the college's equine studies program.

"It's easier for us, I think, for us to do it and say this program makes sense for the mountain area. We have the right person, let’s do it," Elliott said.

But Assemblyman Das Williams, D-Santa Barbara, chairman of the Assembly Higher Education Committee, said it's possible to have local decision-making even in a large area with diverse communities. He cited his local district, the Ventura County Community College District, as an example.

That district serves the majority of Ventura County — roughly 1,900 square miles — and includes very different communities, from Oxnard to Moorpark.

"Even though that’s a very populous district, with three campuses and a couple satellite campuses, it is still very local decision-making," Williams said.

Jack Scott, former chancellor of the California Community Colleges, said it's unlikely the Legislature would ever eliminate locally elected boards. People would believe they were losing their right to elect local officials.

"Politically, if you were starting from scratch, how you would organize the governance of community colleges might be an open question," Scott said. "But to completely uproot the present system seems unlikely."

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