

A Profile of Community College Trustees

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L'apparition, au cours des dernières années, des collèges communautaires au Canada, ajoute une dimension nouvelle à la scène scolaire. L'administration de ces collèges qui peut varier d'une province à l'autre est cependant, dans la plupart d'entre elles, confiée à un conseil issu de la région que dessert le collège. Cet article tente d'examiner la composition de ces conseils. Une étude dont la direction a été confiée à l'Université de l'Alberta a analysé les réponses d'un questionnaire qu'on avait fait parvenir aux conseillers de l'Alberta, de la Colombie britannique et du Québec.

Ces conseils peuvent, dans l'avenir, jouer un rôle vital dans l'orientation de ces établissements. Le profil qui en est donné permet d'en mieux saisir la nature. On y donne le curriculum vitae des conseillers ainsi qu'un aperçu de leurs attitudes face à la dimension souhaitable du conseil, à la durée d'un mandat, à la composition de ce conseil et aux qualités requises pour y siéger.

Cette étude n'a pas cherché à évaluer ce profil ni à préciser l'efficacité de ces conseils d'administration; elle est cependant un outil de travail utile pour entreprendre une telle tâche. C'est un outil valable à la recherche en pédagogie, tout particulièrement dans le champ des innovations.

The advent of community colleges has ushered in a new era in Canadian postsecondary education. Along with new and different opportunities for learning, come new and demanding issues and problems of institutional and system-wide governance. Although trusteeship represents a well-established tradition in Canadian education, both at the compulsory and university levels, non-university postsecondary institutions are less uniform in their governance structures, varying both by institutional type and province. Governing boards are common to community colleges; technical/vocational institutes frequently are administered by government departments.

Community colleges have emerged as full members of Canadian educational systems only within the last decade. General knowledge about this sector of education remains limited, and specific information regarding college boards is almost nonexistent. A recent study of community college boards in Alberta, British Columbia, and selected Quebec institutions conducted at the University of Alberta provides some insights into the make-up of these boards.¹ Persons who serve on college boards may strongly influence the place that community colleges will occupy in the total system of postsecondary education, and certainly should affect the nature of institutional governance.

THE STUDY

A questionnaire, patterned after an instrument used in a national survey of postsecondary trustees in the United States (Hartnett, 1969), was designed to provide a profile of governing-board members in Canadian postsecondary institutions. Data were compiled in May 1975 on the background, educational attitudes, and role perceptions of board members. Only the background of board members is discussed in this article.

A variety of provisions exist in the provinces for the composition of boards and the selection of members.² Alberta college boards consist of five lay members appointed by government and three institutional members: the president, a faculty member, and a student. College boards (councils) in British Columbia are made up of government appointees and local public school trustees from each of the co-operating school districts. Government appointees compose a minority on councils in B.C. and, although the college president and bursar attend meetings, no institutional members serve on the councils. College boards in Quebec are composed of appointed and elected members, 19 in total: five lay members appointed by government, four parents of students elected by the parents, four faculty members, two students, the academic dean, the president, and two additional persons selected by the institution.

All of the governing board members of community colleges in Alberta and British Columbia were invited to participate in the study. Of the 162 members contacted, 107 provided usable returns — a response rate of 69% and 65%, respectively, for the two provinces. An attempt to make this study more broadly representative of community college boards in Canada failed for lack of funding, but three of the four English-speaking CEGEPs (Collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel) in Quebec participated at their own cost. Thus an additional 30 returns (53% of the board members of these three institutions) were compiled, making a total of 137 participants in the study.

Although a descriptive study, the data were analyzed statistically to determine whether observed variations could be related to the province and the method of trustee selection. The profile of community college trustees, described in the following pages, leads to an identification of some major implications for college governance.

FINDINGS

Who serves on community college boards in Canada? A general stereotype of trustees is that they are older, well-educated men, rich, and conservative in their views. Do trustees represent “the establishment” or are they representative of the community at large? Although the sample was too limited to draw national inferences from the data, the evidence suggests that community college trustees differ only slightly from the “general” view mentioned above.

Table 1 / Personal Characteristics of Community College Trustees

Variable	Category	Percent
Sex	Female	26
	Male	74
Age	60 and over	10
	50 to 59	24
	40 to 49	35
	30 to 39	23
	Under 30	9

Personal Characteristics

Although boards were predominantly male, 26% were female (table 1). Statistical analyses revealed significant differences both by province and by method of selection. In British Columbia, as many as 38% were female, while Alberta had 19% and Quebec only 3%. Similarly, government appointees were more often female (38%) than were local public school trustees (28%) or institutional representatives (7%).

The age distribution on community college boards (table 1) indicated that a "typical" trustee was in the 40's, and about a third of the respondents were under 40. Closer analysis showed that trustees in British Columbia were somewhat older than those in Alberta and Quebec, and that local public school trustee representatives tended to be older than government appointees and institutional representatives. An interesting comparison can be drawn by examining the data on United States trustees. In Hartnett's (1969) study, only 12% of the community college trustees were under 40, and 26% were 60 or over (p. 57).

Residence of Trustees

Table 2 provides data on the place of residence of college trustees. A large

Table 2 / Residence of Trustees

Variable	Category	Percent
Province	12 years or more	77
	8 to 11	8
	4 to 7	8
	Under 4	6
College city	Yes	56
	No	44
Distance from city	Over 50 miles	9
	31 to 50	8
	16 to 30	11
	0 to 15	14
	Within city	56

majority (77%) have lived for 12 years or more in the same province as the college. Slightly over half of the respondents resided in the city or town where the head office of their college was. Of those who lived outside the college city or town, one-third lived within 15 miles of it. Only 9% lived more than 50 miles from the college city, the furthest travelling 235 miles to attend board meetings.

Status of Trustees

It is common to use educational level, occupation, and income as indicators of socio-economic status in society. Although no national data are presented for comparative purposes, table 3 indicates the pattern of distribution on these three variables. Almost one-half of the trustees completed formal education at the master's degree level or higher, 60% indicated their occupation to be of a teaching or other professional nature, and 35% reported an annual income of \$30,000 or more. These data clearly show a distribution different from that of society at large.

The distribution by highest level of education attained did not vary by method of selection, but it showed that fewer of the trustees in British Columbia had attained the master's degree (37%) than in Alberta (56%) and Quebec (57%). Governmental appointees were more heavily drawn from the professional and teaching occupations than were the local public school trustee representatives (64% and 43% respectively). As with the educational data, fewer trustees in British Columbia indicated their occupation as professional or teaching (54%) than in Alberta (76%) and Quebec (75%). No differences were observed in income distribution when examined by province and by method of selection.

Table 3 / Status of Trustees

Variable	Category	Percent
Education	Doctorate	24
	Masters	22
	Bachelors	18
	Diploma	24
	High School	13
Occupation	Professional	34
	Teaching	26
	Management	16
	Homemaking	11
	Paraprofessional	11
	Labor	1
Income	\$50,000 and over	10
	\$30,000 to 49,999	25
	\$20,000 to 29,999	30
	\$15,000 to 19,999	11
	Under 15,000	24

Table 4 / Political Identification of Trustees

Variable	Category	Percent
Political ideology	Liberal	47
	Moderate	43
	Conservative	11
Party preference	NDP	36
	Liberal	29
	Progressive Conservative	21
	Social Credit	6
	Other	8

Political Identification

Trustees were asked to describe their political ideology or leaning and to identify their party preference (table 4). In general terms, 9 out of 10 board members perceived themselves as either moderate or liberal. That 47% of the trustees regarded themselves as liberal, compared with only 13% in Hartnett's (1969) study in the United States (p. 65), appears quite impressive. Interestingly, political ideology was related to province, but not to method of selection. Respectively, 64% and 52% of Quebec and British Columbia board members, compared with only 17% in Alberta, considered themselves to have liberal leanings.

The survey showed clearly that party preference was related both to province and method of selection. A large majority of the Progressive Conservative board members were in Alberta (78%) and were appointees of a Progressive Conservative Government; similarly, 82% of the New Democratic Party board members were in British Columbia and were mostly government appointees. In Quebec, five-eighths of the trustees were Liberal. It appears that the political identification of board members tends to fluctuate according to the party in power provincially.

Trustee Experience

Most college board members were relatively new in their positions. About one-third of all respondents (table 5) were in their first year of service. Almost twice as many local public school trustee representatives as government appointees, 46% and 24% respectively, had been board members for less than one year.

Previous experience on educational boards was primarily at the public school level; only 8% of respondents had served on college or university boards. Seventy percent of the college board members in British Columbia had local public school trustee experience, compared with 21% in Alberta and only 4% in Quebec. It might be surmised that the dominant orientation of college boards, at least in British Columbia, was similar to that of public school boards.

On the other hand, college trustees have served on a variety of non-

Table 5 / Trustee Experience

Variable	Category	Percent
Tenure	8 years or more	4
	4 to 7	15
	1 to 3	47
	Under 1	35
School trustee	Yes	43
	No	57
College or university	Yes	8
	No	92
Other board	Five or more	18
	Three, Four	28
	One, Two	33
	None	22

educational boards, such as municipal, church, cultural affairs, community service, and corporation, during the past five years. However, 22% of the trustees in this study had no previous board experience of any kind; in Hartnett's (1969) survey this was true for only 4% (p. 58).

Board Size and Term

Differences in board size and length of term of office prevail among the provinces. Alberta boards consist of 8 members, and Quebec boards of 19. In British Columbia, the size of college boards (councils) depends on the number of school districts participating in the operation of the college. Lay members in Alberta and Quebec serve three-year terms and are subject to reappointment; institutional members serve one-year terms which also may be renewed. In British Columbia the term of office for all board members is one year.

Board members were asked to indicate their board size and length of term of office as well as their preference on these two items. Table 6 indicates that the trustees would prefer to serve on medium-sized boards for longer terms than at present. Sixty-three percent responded that they were serving a one-year term; except for institutional representatives in Alberta and Quebec, all of these were in British Columbia. The most popular preference was for a board of 9 to 11 members with a 3-year term of office.

Board Composition

Board members were invited to express their preference for the college board's composition. Table 7 summarizes the views of board members, showing significant variations by province on nine items and by method of selection on seven. In general, board members tended toward the status quo on most items; differences in perception seem to closely follow provincial differences.

Table 6 / Board Size and Term

Variable	Category	Percent	
		Actual	Preferred
Size	18 or more	18	9
	15 to 17	16	20
	12 to 14	17	15
	9 to 11	23	37
	6 to 8	26	20
Term	Over 3 years	3	17
	Three	29	39
	Two	5	36
	One	63	8

Table 7 / Opinions about Board Composition

Statements	Percentage	
	Agree	Disagree
Board members should be elected locally.	52	35 ^{PS}
Members should be appointed by government.	51	45 ^{PS}
Some should be elected, others appointed.	68	24 ^P
School trustees should represent local districts.	46	40 ^{PS}
President should be a voting member.	41	48 ^P
Faculty should be represented.	76	22 ^{PS}
Non-academic staff should be represented.	51	41 ^{PS}
Students should be represented.	76	20 ^{PS}
Alumni should be represented.	34	40 ^{PS}
Local committee should nominate.	58	24
Provincial committee should nominate.	9	73
Governmental committee should nominate.	6	82

^PProvincial differences were statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

^SDifferences by method of selection were statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

Respondents strongly endorsed provisions for faculty and student representation on boards, but were quite divided on whether or not the college president should be a voting member of the board. Only in Quebec did a majority of respondents favor giving presidents voting membership.

While the provisions for the selection of board members vary considerably among the provinces, a fairly strong consensus emerged regarding the issue of governmental involvement. Trustees strongly opposed the use of both government departmental and provincial nominating committees in the appointment of board members. A similar attitude against this type of governmental involvement was expressed by newly appointed board members in Alberta in an earlier study (Konrad, Note 1). If nominating committees are to be used, the respondents felt they should have a local composition.

Table 8 / Rating of Important Trustee Characteristics

Personal Characteristics	Total Mean
1. Interest in higher education	4.69
2. Vision to move ahead	4.51
3. Understanding of institutional role	4.47
4. Time to devote to board activity	4.43
5. Involvement in community affairs	4.12
6. Business knowledge	3.81
7. Stature in vocation or occupation	3.81
8. Stature within the community	3.78
9. Strong views about most matters	3.04
10. Known to other board members	2.99
11. A middle-of-the-road viewpoint	2.90
12. Alumnus of the institution	2.89
13. Ability to make financial contributions	2.35
14. Involvement in party politics	2.33

Trustee Characteristics

The last perspective this profile focuses upon is the characteristics regarded by trustees as important in selecting board members. Trustees were asked to rate 14 items on a 5-point scale from "very important" (5) to "highly undesirable" (1). In table 8 the items are arranged in descending order of importance by the total mean response. The first eight items were rated important or very important, items 9 to 12 were regarded as unimportant or irrelevant, and the last two characteristics were viewed as undesirable.

In the opinion of all college board members, of greatest importance in selecting new trustees are interest in higher education, vision to move ahead, understanding of institutional role, and time to devote to board activity. Alberta and British Columbia trustees considered involvement in community affairs more important than did those in Quebec. Institutional representatives, however, regarded community involvement as less important than did other board members.

SUMMARY

Among the important findings of this study, the following generalizations may provide a useful profile of Canadian community college trustees.

1. College trustees are characterized by a considerable degree of diversity on almost every variable, and this diversity is particularly pronounced by province and method of selection.
2. Notwithstanding the variability among trustees, a "typical" board member may be described as male, in his middle forties, a long-time resident of the province, and living within the same city or town as the college. He is highly educated, a member of a profession, and well-off financially. Ideologically he views himself as a liberal, and he is a member of the

political party in power provincially. He is newly appointed, and has not previously served on a college or university board.

3. Trustees view with caution the provisions for structuring boards and selecting members used in other provinces, tending to favor the procedures that brought them into office.

4. Board members would prefer serving 3-year terms on boards of 9 to 11 members.

5. Trustees strongly favor faculty and student membership on boards, but are divided regarding voting privileges for presidents.

6. If board members are to be appointed, trustees almost uniformly oppose provincial nominating structures, particularly those centred in government. Trustees clearly favor a decentralized approach to the appointment of board members.

7. Trustees consider the most important characteristics in selecting board members to be of a personal nature — they have regard to matters such as interest, vision, understanding, and time. Indeed, ability to make financial contributions and political party involvement appear to be regarded as undesirable qualities.

IMPLICATIONS

This profile has been largely descriptive, providing some understanding about the make-up of community college boards. No attempt has been made to evaluate the profile, nor to determine how effectively boards of this nature serve their institutions. But this profile may be helpful in identifying some implications for college governance.

Independence

Traditionally, a board of trustees exists to legitimize public authority within an institution. Whether trustees serve through election or appointment, they are charged to “hold the trust” for an institution on behalf of the public. A board also acts as a buffer between the public, its elected government officials, and an institution. Politically, a board exercises independence that is vital to the freedom of an institution. Several features in this profile seem to reflect upon the authority and independence of college boards.

Although trustees regarded involvement in party politics as undesirable, the political identification of board members fluctuated according to the political party in power provincially. Political parties and individual candidates may well have interests and attitudes that favor, or oppose, certain college programs. How much money to spend on education and whether to support a specific program can become major concerns for politicians in their constituency relationships. Close identification of trustees with a political party can clearly threaten the authority and independence of a board.

The term of office could serve as a check on political partisanship. Obviously, trustees who serve short terms are more seriously subject to political pressures than those who serve long terms. Through longer terms, judiciously staggered, political independence could be strengthened substantially.

Another factor affecting political independence is the nominating procedure used to select board members. Trustees almost unanimously opposed the use of governmental nominating procedures. In his study of college and university governance, Corson (1975) proposed the use of “distinguished nonpartisan individuals” on nominating commissions to reduce the likelihood of politically partisan appointments (p. 272). Furthermore, a nominating commission may enjoy greater regional credibility than politicians in the provincial capital, particularly if local community representation were to be included.

Although the main challenges to a board’s independence come primarily from political officeholders, they can also come from within — from the very composition of the board itself. When a trustee serves by virtue of membership in another organization, as is the case with a majority of the board (council) members in British Columbia who represent local public school districts, jurisdictional independence can suffer severely. Leaving aside such matters as individual energy, time, and rapid turnover, the question arises: Can a trustee unreservedly give his allegiance to the college when a prior commitment has been made to the local school district?

Representativeness

A board should serve as a bridge between the college and its community. How representative it is of society at large is a characteristic that affects this function. How favorably the public regards the college depends on the board’s ability to assess the spectrum of society’s views and the manner in which it interprets the college’s programs. Without broad representation, the board’s effectiveness can be sharply curtailed.

According to this profile, trustees were characterized by diversity, but obviously not by the degree of diversity found within the constituency of a college. Can a community college board establish appropriate policies in areas of career and service occupations, problems of minority groups, women, and labor when its membership is drawn almost exclusively from male members of professional and business communities?

A concern for representativeness does not, however, imply tacit approval of vested interests of power blocs within a board. The preference shown for faculty and student membership on boards may evidence a desire among trustees for stronger involvement in internal campus affairs. Indeed, trustees should function as a “court of last appeal” on internal disputes. A board should guard, however, against settling disputes on bases of a purely academic nature; its authority derives from a legitimacy in the

public domain, not from an expertise in academic matters. This implies that faculty and student members cease to “represent” institutional constituencies when a board convenes. While their perspective is clearly that of faculty or students, their task, like that of the “lay” members, is to represent the needs of society to the college, and to interpret the college to its constituency.

The matter of voting membership for the president raises another complex issue. As chief administrator, the college president is responsible to the board for the execution of its policies; and as institutional head, he is responsible for submitting institutional plans and proposals to the board’s authority. If the president were a voting member he necessarily would take a stand on all policy discussions. It could be more difficult for him to present fairly more than one side of an issue. And other board members might feel reluctant to raise penetrating questions or make counter proposals because these could be interpreted as showing a lack of confidence in the president. In other words, a president could find himself under continuous review under such an arrangement and this might develop a sense of powerlessness as the chief administrator of the college. (Of course, some might argue that such an atmosphere is most desirable for a board in discharging its trust.) Whatever the resolution of presidential voting rights, the decision could hardly be based upon a concern for representativeness.

One way to increase the representativeness of college boards would be to establish specific criteria for trusteeship. The characteristics in this profile that were rated important or very important could form the basis for such a listing. Other factors, such as those concerned more directly with age, sex, and social status, could also be incorporated into such a set of criteria.

Effectiveness

Perhaps the most pressing implications relate to the performance of boards. The concern of this paper is not to evaluate board effectiveness, but to identify features in the profile that may affect board effectiveness.

That 9 out of 10 trustees regarded themselves as moderate or liberal may augur well for the future of community colleges. A board characterized by ideological openness may be more supportive of innovation and flexibility than one that has more traditional views. A community college that seeks to provide new options and services to the community would benefit greatly from a creative board. (This optimistic interpretation is dampened somewhat by the conclusion that trustees were cautious about structures and procedures employed in provinces other than their own.)

The fact that only a few trustees had previous college or university board experience, combined with the short terms of office and the rapid turnover of trustees, suggests that boards are not very effective at the time

of their inception. Trustees may be people of stature and general wisdom, but if they lack an understanding of the community college and its mission, their leadership will not be effective. Various steps could be taken to improve the start-up period, including orientation sessions and leadership workshops. Also, if board members are to serve effectively, they need terms of office that are long enough to allow appropriate orientation and substantial involvement in college affairs.

Annual selection of public school district representatives has been a major factor contributing to the lack of continuity in board memberships in British Columbia, according to Gray (Note 2).

Finally, effectiveness may be a function of the selection process. Some lay trustees are elected and others are appointed. On the assumption that persons selected through both processes are equally well qualified for office, two concerns may be relevant. The election process relies heavily upon political astuteness and may condition the incumbent to be partisan. This could severely limit his or her ability to function as an "independent" trustee. Secondly, experience shows that many people who are highly qualified and would fill the role well tend not to seek office through a popular election, especially people of low social status. Carefully developed procedures for the nomination and appointment of trustees could therefore lead to greater effectiveness by college boards.

CONCLUSION

Community colleges have recently emerged as part of provincial post-secondary educational systems. As new institutions, their governance structures and processes vary considerably across the country, and are still developing. The profile offered in this article provides information about the make-up of college boards, and has been used to identify some implications for college governance. Although no attempt has been made to evaluate boards, criteria for such an evaluation could be derived from these implications.

NOTES

1. The study was supported by a grant from the Alberta Advisory Committee on Educational Studies.
2. For a discussion of how different board compositions may influence board functioning see Konrad (1975).

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