

**A Report to the  
Ventura County Community College District  
Board of Trustees on the  
Current Operation of the Board and  
Strategies for Improved Board Performance**

**Conducted as part of the contract between the VCCCD and CBT by Senior  
Consultant Brice W. Harris**

**December 13, 2021**

***A Review of the Current Operation of the  
Ventura County Community College District Board of Trustees  
And Strategies for Improving the Functioning and Performance of the Board***

**December 7, 2021**

**Overview and Background:** The Ventura County Community College District has a long and proud history of service to the community and education of area citizens. However, in recent years the Board has expressed concern over their ability to work together and recently sought outside assistance to assess their work together and to facilitate opportunities for improved Board performance.

As part of that effort the District engaged The Collaborative Brain Trust (CBT), and specifically Senior Consultant Brice Harris to conduct an assessment of Board performance, facilitate a retreat including recommendations for improved Board performance, and conduct follow-up review of the Board's work. The CBT/VCCCD contract called for the following specific tasks:

- Review documents related to Board conduct and operation over the past six months
- View past meetings of the Board to analyze the conduct of the Board in their public meetings
- Conduct individual interviews with the District Trustees in advance of a Board retreat
- Prepare for a Board retreat
- Conduct a Board retreat designed to help the Board better understand their challenges in working together to oversee and lead the District, and to develop strategies for improvement of Board performance
- After the Board retreat, observe three regular meetings of the Board to determine if improvement strategies are having the desired effect

The brief report that follows is designed to set the stage for the upcoming Board retreat scheduled for January 8, 2022 and facilitated by CBT consultant Dr. Helen Benjamin. The purposes of the retreat will be to:

- Help the Board assess its current level of performance
- Provide the Board with strategies for improving their work together and the conduct of their public meetings
- Further assist the Board in preparation for the District's upcoming accreditation visit
- Begin preparing the Board for the process of replacing the retiring District Chancellor

**Analysis of Current Board Operation:**

Over the past six weeks CBT consultant Brice Harris reviewed several hours of several of the most recent regular meetings of the Ventura Board of Trustees, interviewed each trustee individually, reviewed internal Board communications, and interviewed key stakeholders in the district including classified and academic senate leaders, college presidents, the Chancellor and other key District Office managers. The result of this review is summarized in the points below.

- **The Ventura CCCD Board of Trustees is currently experiencing significant difficulty working together and the individual members feel that the Board is functioning below an acceptable level.** The Board members uniformly expressed concern and frustration over the current operation of the Board. Many expressed mixed feelings when asked if they were enjoying their service as a trustee.
- **There is a significant lack of trust among members of the Board and between members of the Board and the Chancellor.** In the interviews of trustees and stakeholders the issue of trust, and a lack of trust, came up frequently. Numerous respondents implied that some members of the Board do not trust one another, that there is a lack of trust between the Chancellor and the Board and that people in the organization are increasingly worried about the impact of this trust issue on the culture of the organization. There is no one trustee responsible for the erosion of trust. In fact, there seems to be more than enough “blame” to go around.
- **Both the members of the Board and the stakeholders generally feel the Board is functioning less effectively than at this same time last year.** Of the interviews conducted almost no one felt as if the operation of the Board was improving, and many – including most members of the Board – felt as if it was in decline.
- **There is a dramatic difference of opinion on the operation of the Board and the role of a trustee resulting in a frequent 3/2 split among members.** Although the Board has few split votes on business of the District, many respondents felt there is a clear 3-2 dynamic on the Board which has increasingly led to an uncomfortable environment during most Board meetings. Trustees find themselves trying to “sway” one another on many issues. This results in lengthy discussions where the same issues and opinions are repeated over-and-over in an attempt to change the minds of other trustees. As this continues, occasionally for hours, everyone involved becomes frustrated.
- **Although trustees often agree on desired outcomes of the district, they frequently have significant disagreement on how to achieve those outcomes resulting in a high level of frustration of all Board members.** Trustees seem uniformly committed to student access, student success, diversity/equity/inclusion (DEI), fiscal responsibility and the role of the District in the community. However, those same individuals dramatically disagree on how the district should achieve those outcomes. This disagreement has caused some trustees to feel as if their opinions are not valued, and others to feel as if their colleagues are resisting change. The result of this environment is frequent “filibustering” among members, a continual comparison of this Board to past Boards and the way things were done in the past, and some trustees who become so frustrated that they simply do not engage in the discussions.
- **There is a significant level of concern both among trustees and stakeholders that the Board is occasionally micromanaging and often functioning outside their appropriate roles.** Board members do not have a common understanding of, and commitment to, the role of the Board or the role of an individual trustee. Although all members of the Board say they do not micromanage, they often go on to say they think some or all of their colleagues do just that.

- **There are members of the Board who feel that there is a significant resistance to change among other members of the Board, as well as the Chancellor and organization.** Significant disagreements on process among trustees results in equally significant disagreements on the willingness to change and the speed of change. Some trustees feel as if their colleagues on the Board rely too often on the way things have always been done and are unwilling to change. Other trustees feel strongly that agreed-upon processes must be followed or changed. This situation is often interpreted among Board members as either using the process to stop needed change or ignoring the process to accomplish things with which the rest of the Board does not agree. Over time, individual Board member's view of this situation has hardened, relationships have been damaged and it has become increasingly difficult for them to work together.
- **Although the Board and organization seem committed to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), members of the Board and stakeholder leaders feel as if those discussions too often overpower other equally-important discussions during Board meetings.** Trustees and stakeholders relate their concerns that the Board has become overly focused on this single issue and that it has caused the Board to reduce other important discussions and in fact made addressing DEI less effective because people fear saying something which could be taken the wrong way.
- **The Board has an increasing credibility problem with internal stakeholders, and their reputation is suffering as a result.** Increasingly, the Board is viewed as ineffective and dysfunctional. Meetings of the Board are overly long and very intense causing those participating in, and observing, the meetings to feel as if the Board has trouble conducting even the simplest tasks. Further, stakeholders feel as if the situation is worsening rather than improving.
- **Board meetings are overly long and Trustees and staff are often frustrated and exhausted by the end of the meetings.** Observing the extremely long public meetings of the Board it is clear that they are frustrating for everyone involved. As the meetings progress past two, three and four hours that frustration often turns into exhaustion and too often the actual business of the Board is conducted very late in the meetings.
- **Trustees ask for numerous reports from staff which are not always supported by a majority of the Board, and the creation of these reports results in significant staff time that is often not used in decision making.** Although the Board has previously agreed not to request reports and research from staff unless a majority of the trustees agree with that request, a review of the meetings and internal communications reveals that this frequently happens. Key staff members express concern over this added work not because of the work itself, but because of the burden it places on their ability to get the regular work of the district completed.
- **Although the Board has generally taken the process of accreditation seriously, there is an uneven level of confidence in the outcome and the organization has serious concerns about the governance standard and how the Board will be perceived by the visiting team.** Trustees express concern over accreditation as do stakeholders. Those

writing the self-study (ISER) documents were concerned enough to write two versions of the Governance Standard. One version detailed the current situation and the other the desired state. Trustees reacted differently regarding this approach with some feeling it was a good strategy to help the Board focus on improvement and others feeling as if the Board was being called to task. All members of the Board must work together to address this critical issue and understand that the accreditation of the colleges is an extremely serious and important issue.

- **Although the Board understands the importance of the process of replacing the Chancellor, there is an uneven level of understanding of, and commitment to, that process.** Trustees are uniformly aware of the importance of their responsibility to identify and employ the next Chancellor of the District. They are also committed to the process. However, they are in varying states of readiness for the task and have different levels of understanding of what is involved.

### **Strategies for Enhancing Board Performance:**

Over the next year the Board will undertake two of the most important responsibilities they have in leading the District. First, they will participate in the important process of seeking reaccreditation of the District's colleges. Second, they will undertake the process of replacing the Chancellor of the District, their only employee. In its current state, the Board is not ready for either of those undertakings. They must employ strategies to improve their relationships, reach a common understanding of their role, prepare for accreditation, and understand and undertake a Chancellor's search. This report is not the first to attempt to address the situation. The Board has previously had in-service training by the Community College League of California, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, and has repeatedly attempted to address their differences. Yet those differences persist, and the time for addressing the issues is running out. The strategies listed below will aid the Board in working together and in preparing for these important challenges.

1. **The Board should conduct an open discussion among its members about the roles and responsibilities of the Board and reach a clear and common understanding of those roles.** Trustees have all worked to better understand the role of a community college trustee, but they have vastly different understanding of those roles. For example, they all say that the Board is responsible for policy development, but how this is undertaken and to what level of detail they are involved is significantly different among trustees. They also all agree that the only employee of the Board is the Chancellor, and yet some of trustees will go around that employee directly to other members of the staff. The Board also agrees that they have overall fiduciary responsibility. However, to some members this means asking questions about specific purchases while others consider that responsibility to be vested in staff. The Board must reach a level of understanding and trust that both allows them to ensure the finances of the District are sound, while leaving specific financial decision making up to the professional staff given that responsibility. Regardless of the issue, individual trustees must be willing to compromise and find common ground.

2. **Trustees should have a discussion about working relationships with one another. Specifically, the Board must talk about their individual frustrations in working together and with the Chancellor and work to find common ground so they can work for the betterment of the District, students and community.** This conversation is likely to be uncomfortable, but necessary. Until trustees talk out their frustrations with one another, agree to put those frustrations in the past and work to compromise with each other, this problem is likely to continue. It is not uncommon for elected officials to struggle to work with their colleagues. However, this cannot be used as an excuse to maintain a dysfunctional environment. The organization, students and community depend on the elected trustees to work together for the betterment of the District even if they do not always like one another. This conversation can be conducted along with the discussion about Board roles and responsibilities.
3. **The Board should assert control of their public meetings and reduce their length significantly.** Although the Board has worked over the past several months to evaluate their performance in conducting their business, including discussing the issue at each meeting, their meetings continue to be far too lengthy and focused too often on issues other than those on the regular agenda. The Board can maintain their strong desire to encourage public input, while exercising appropriate limits on that input which allows them to ensure the public's business is conducted within a reasonable length of time. There are far too many reports at each meeting and those reports are often too lengthy. The Board should make their expectations well known to all stakeholders and be willing to exercise their authority to limit discussion and input. They should consider alterations to their agendas to ensure that the business of the Board is conducted early in the meetings. This may occasionally mean that some audience members have to wait until later in the meeting to make reports and comments on items not on the agenda, but it will ensure that the Board has an adequate amount of time to discuss and deliberate on the most important items brought before their considerations. As part of the revision of the conduct of their meetings the Board should provide clear direction to the Chancellor on their expectation on reports from constituent groups and executive staff members.
4. **Individual trustees must follow agreed-upon protocol in their work outside regular meetings of the Board.** In past months individual trustees have gone around the Chancellor to conduct conversations with other district and constituent leaders. Although trustees can legally talk with anyone they choose, they damage the structure of the organization and the agreed-upon governance processes when they do not go through their only employee – the Chancellor – to conduct those discussions. If the Board members feel as if they must go outside the normal process because they fear they are not getting accurate and complete information, then this is an issue related to the evaluation of the Chancellor rather than an excuse to ignore agreed-upon protocols. This review documented significant issues of trust among trustees, between the Board and Chancellor and within key stakeholders, the Board and the management team. These issues will not be addressed as long as back-channel communication continues. Also, individual trustees request reports and research resulting in significant demands on precious staff time needed to complete the regular business of the district. The Board can only act as a whole, and any and all requests for staff work must be supported by a majority of the Board as has been agreed-to previously by the Board.

5. **The Board should conduct further discussions regarding the upcoming accreditation visit and specifically address the desired vs current draft of the self-study (ISER) of the standard on governance.** The Board has participated in in-service training provided by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), but should have further conversations regarding the recent work done by the writing team for the College's self-study or ISER documents. Some Board members expressed concerns over the two versions of the standard while others thought it was an effective way of getting the Board to address the issues. The colleges have legitimate concerns over the impact of the Board's performance on their accreditation and deserve to have the Board work to minimize or eliminate those issues.
  
6. **The Board should move quickly to ensure the search for a new Chancellor remains on schedule and have a special meeting to further discuss this important process.** The District has issued the RFP for proposals for search firms for the search process. They need to move quickly to review those firms, discuss the calendar and make decisions on the firm and the timeline. They will need to decide if they intend to use an interim or if they believe they can meet the current deadline for Chancellor Gillespie's retirement. They should also conduct a Board workshop or study session on this topic, preferably facilitated by the search firm of their choice. It is still possible to conduct a robust search that insures an opportunity for input from all stakeholders. However, the front-end input is very important and should take place as soon as the faculty return in the Spring semester. There is adequate time to conduct forums to solicit input on the profile for the next Chancellor, advertise the post for 30-60 days, conduct initial interviews, narrow the final group, conduct public forums and ultimately employ a new Chancellor to report on or soon after July 1, 2022, but the Board must make this process an immediate priority.

**Summary:**

The individual members of the Ventura County Community College District Board of Trustees are all committed to their service as a trustee for the right reasons. They uniformly speak of their desire to serve the students, the community and the District. It is not uncommon for trustees to serve in elected office for inappropriate reasons, but that is in no way evident among members of this Board. However, the Board is clearly struggling. Those struggles have resulted in not only challenges in conducting the Board's business, but in the relationships among trustees and with the Chancellor. Unless trustees take these issues seriously and dedicate themselves to the compromise and understanding required to improve, the organization will continue to suffer.