

College Lessons Part II Special Interests

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Figure 1: Here is the nexus of special interests. The intersection of K Street and K Street. Modified from google images.

In the first installment of this series I spoke of a Board imperative to protect their community college from special interests. Cyndra Smith, in her book on Trusteeship, mentions the same, but with less emphasis. However, before the Board can provide such protection they have to recognize those special interests. So, the question I try to answer here is “What is a special interest?”

We are being trained, unfortunately, to see special interests as forces beyond the public institutions they seek to influence. K Street, for example, the media identifies as the entire problem with spending and bad legislation in our Federal Government. Occupy Wall Street sees Wall Street in this same

role. However, as I meant Figure 1 to suggest, all streets are K Street to some degree, or intersect with K Street someplace.

A rogues gallery

Can we build a list of special interests that infect a typical community college? Yes, I think, and it contains mainly elements within the college itself. Surely there are commercial interests outside the college which ask for favors from time to time. In my experience, though, the only favor put to me by a commercial interest was one who asked only that contracts be fair and competitive. Now there is a corrupting suggestion if ever I heard one.

Instead, I find the special interests most damaging to community colleges are those that no one thinks much about or that most people see as unmitigated good. My list of potentially destructive interests includes employee associations, crony hiring, empire-building administrators, public/private partnerships, and some highly visible campus programs.

Employee associations

Employee associations include unions, which always antagonize Boards and administrators, and also non-union associations that simply seek to speak for members. Most colleges spend the bulk of their budgets (70% in our case), on salaries and wages. Community college finances are far more sensitive to wage changes than to any other expense. Unions and employee associations (EAs) always promote wage increases for their members, which translate into higher wages for everyone else as well. To meet all these demands fully Boards would have to remove resources from supplies, equipment, maintenance, security, and so forth. Also EAs promote protection of employees from dismissal or discipline through due process. This protection is a good thing when it shields good workers from administrators who are retaliatory and unfair. One does not have to go very, however, before due process becomes permanent job security, veto over management, zero accountability, and partial paralysis of the campus.

Empire builders

Every campus consists of managers of varying ambitions and skills. I cannot imagine one that does not contain at least one administrator who seeks endlessly to hire more workers and gain additional resources; and, is amazingly good at both. Public relations, human relations, student services, campus security, information technology and so forth are all organizations that grew spectacularly at one time or another on our campus. Some of this growth may have been the result of a neglected area that needed to grow. However, insiders possess self-interest and will try to make their programs grow far beyond an economical scale. Boards are not elected to aid this process.

Nonetheless, Boards often engage in the sort of wishful thinking that Public Choice theory supposedly displaced. Boards view, with lots of encouragement from administrators, that college employees and programs work only for the public good. Rubbish. Public employees also have self-interest. I'm not against self-interest *per se*; for example, I strongly support free markets. However, free markets promote their self interest using their own resources. Public employees do not. Over and again I find managers and administrators that tend mainly to their own parochial concerns. One of the most damaging of parochial concerns is managers hiring cronies and friends.

Now it may be that hiring people one already knows well leads also to the hiring of high quality employees. But even if this were true occasionally, one cannot demonstrate that this produces a credible hire. Cronyism is inversely proportional to credibility. One cannot defend cronyism in public institutions. Moreover, cronyism has a corrosive effect on employee morale, and it leads to cynicism among those employees asked to take part, faithfully, in a process that is a farce intended to hire a particular person.

It is mind boggling, then, when we make incentives for this behavior by basing pay upon the number of people below a supervisor or administrator in the organizational chart; and also allow managers various schemes to rig hiring.

Partnerships

I've been a partner in many ventures, and only on one occasion was the partnership truly equal. In all other cases there was always one partner who contributed more. In extreme cases the partnership became so lopsided that

one partner only benefits from what the other only contributes.

Local employers love to offload some of their management failings onto the community college. A common example is coaxing the college to produce a stream of graduates to fill the ranks of employees who quit and find work elsewhere. The college doesn't exist to solve management problems at private employers. This occurs most often when a college program prepares students for a single company. The Board ought to demand the administrators demonstrate a benefit to cost ratio no less than one for all partnerships; and, that employers provide substantial monetary support for dedicated programs. A Board ought to consider the expense and consequences of programs that produce far more graduates than the service area can absorb.

Campus programs

Campus programs can become self-perpetuating devourers of resources. "Work Force Development" is a trendy program on campuses nationwide. It seeks to give people special skills to enter a job force. From our college president right up to the current Federal administration we are pressured to create more workforce programs, and recruit to those we already have more intensely. But does this produce what employers need? Does this provide value to students?

Employers ask for employees who can read and comprehend what they've read; write clearly, perform simple mathematics, and exhibit some critical thinking skills. These are academic skills, and we spend a huge effort to teach these skills at the college level and also at remedial levels. So why do we fail to see academics as workforce development?

Employers ask also for employees with basic job skills such as showing up to work on-time and sober, and to inform someone if they cannot show up. We have no development programs for these skills at all, although a person could argue that an academic education would help in these regards also.

Instead we have programs in alternative energy even though there are no jobs in alternative energy in our service district; we have an industrial skills program even though there is no industry in our service district to speak of, and only one graduate of the program in eight years; and we have a technical certificate where students will not show up even when they are paid through a government jobs program to do so. Yet, these programs thrive on campus resources.

What's a Board to do?

With regard to hiring and cronyism on a campus, a Board has to rely on a Human Resources office strong enough to make sure hiring practices are sound, legal, and fair; yet also wise enough to not interfere in evaluating skills that HR people know little to nothing about. Beyond this, a Board could ask for an annual report that substantiates that hiring is competitive, and that hiring pools contain well qualified candidates. So far I've not been able to rouse support for such reporting on our Board; but it will happen eventually.

With regard to programs and partnerships, a Board rarely has an opportunity to simply direct where specific resources should go; and so, a Board has to rely on asking questions to demonstrate that a program or partnership is well designed, and well intended, or not. One other Board member and I are trying to force all new programs to come up with an honest-to-god business plan. In this plan we expect a true budget projection for a number of years, sources of revenue, identifying market, marketing plan, competitors, resources needed, first costs, capitalized costs, benefit to cost ratio, and so forth. In effect the Board plays the role of venture capitalist, asking hard questions about why the college should invest in the proposed program. So far we have seen only poor plans, but they are improving; and, we managed to halt a program for which there was no reasonable plan at all. This is progress.