Improving Shared Governance's Effectiveness

A Shared Governance Whitepaper

for Trustees, Presidents, Administrators and Faculty

by

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This whitepaper provides an overview of shared governance in the academy and suggests a method to improve shared governance's effectiveness through strategy development. It briefly covers two key statements on college and university governance which inform the way shared governance is generally practiced. The paper discusses shared governance's inherent tensions, the challenges of leadership in a distributed governance model, and conflicting perceptions of faculty involvement in shared governance. The paper concludes by describing how shared governance can be strengthened to collectively and successfully achieve institutional goals.

Improving Shared Governance's Effectiveness

Introduction

Shared governance can confound trustees, presidents, administrators and faculty because of a lack of consensus regarding the distribution of power in a shared governance model. Over the past half century as the practice of shared governance has evolved, the concept of shared governance increasingly has been written about. An aspect of shared governance requiring attention today is the changing role of faculty in the governance triumvirate. While shared governance is endorsed by many higher education associations including the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Council on Education (ACE) and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), faculty involvement in institutional decision making remains underutilized at many institutions. Given the types of challenges colleges and universities currently face, it is especially critical that shared governance be revitalized and that the board, administration and faculty find ways to work together productively to accomplish institutional goals.

A Framework for Understanding Governance Responsibilities

Campuses interested in strengthening governance processes for greater institutional effectiveness begin by reaching agreement on the legitimate roles the board, administration and faculty each play in institutional decision making. The two statements most often used in understanding governance responsibilities are the AAUP *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,* developed jointly with the ACE and AGB in 1966, and the *Statement on Board Responsibilities for Institutional Governance* issued by the AGB in 2010. The salient points each make regarding governance responsibilities follows.

Governing boards have defined power and legal responsibility for the governance of higher education institutions in America. According to the AGB in the 2010 *Statement on Board Responsibilities for Institutional Governance*, the board's fiduciary responsibility and role in shared governance encompasses the institution's academic quality and fiscal integrity. The board is responsible for preserving the institution's mission and values, which—by tradition—involves the meaningful participation of the faculty and other appropriate campus constituents in institutional decision making (AGB, 2010). The board is expected to partner with the president and senior leadership to achieve the college's mission, sustain its core operations, and attain mutually derived strategic priorities (AGB, 2010). Typically, the board formally delegates responsibility for the day-to-day management of the institution to the president, who then delegates authority to senior officers accountable for the college's operations. The faculty has specific and significant responsibility for curriculum and pedagogy; however, the board has final institutional authority (AAUP, 2006; AGB, 2010).

An earlier and equally influential statement on shared governance, the 1966 AAUP *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,* also emphasizes the shared responsibility of the board, president, administration and faculty in achieving education quality and results. Recognizing that governance varies by institution, the statement recommends a set of principles upon which sound governance structures and procedures are to be established. Two significant ideas introduced in the statement include the "inescapable interdependence" of principal constituents and their "joint responsibility" in institutional governance (2006, p. 136).

The joint efforts of the board, administration, and faculty are necessary in certain areas of institutional governance— institutional purpose, long-range planning, physical resources, short- and long-term budgeting, presidential selection, and chief academic personnel; however, the responsibility and influence of each of these constituent groups varies by issue (AAUP, 2006). The statement asserts that shared governance increases an institution's capacity to address institutional challenges when governance constituents uphold their interdependent relationship, keeps channels of communication open, and becomes a "force of joint action"

(2006, p. 136). The statement emphasizes that planning is a critical activity in which members of the faculty, administration, and board have a responsibility to the institution and each other, a point that will be addressed more extensively in this whitepaper.

Shared authority, as described in the AAUP statement, is not equal authority; rather, each participant group in the shared governance triumvirate plays a determinative, consultative, or informational role in decision making depending on the issue under consideration. The statement makes clear that faculty voices should be considered on issues of institutional consequence, even while the president has ultimate managerial responsibility. The differences in each group's authority, accountability, and influence creates the 'messiness' of shared governance on individual campuses, and accounts for the widely varying practice of shared governance in American higher education. It is not surprising, therefore, that shared governance puzzles new members of a campus community.

Dual Authority with Dissimilar Perspectives

Governance scholars have acknowledged criticism of shared governance as being slow, inefficient, and unresponsive to the changing higher education environment (AGB, 1996; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Shuster, Smith, Corak, & Yamada, 1994). Yet they argue that shared governance can facilitate effective decision making because it draws upon multiple institutional perspectives, thus assuring higher likelihood that decisions will be institutionalized (Birnbaum, 2004; Curry, 1992). In his seminal book on governance, *How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organizations and Leadership*, Richard Birnbaum (1988) highlighted the importance of the unique dualism of the faculty and administration in institutional decision making. He argues that the redundancy of overlapping authority creates a useful tension for better decisions because it accommodates the differing perspectives of the faculty and administration while preserving institutional values and purpose: "Faculty involvement in shared governance may slow down the decision making process, but it also assures more thorough discussion and provides the institution with a sense of order and stability" (Birnbaum, 2004, p.

7). Multiple perspectives in decision making complicate the process of reaching agreement, at the same time however, they benefit the institution because they typically result in carefully considered decisions.

Administrative and faculty authority frequently come into conflict around academic decision making due to these divergent perspectives. Administrative authority is organized hierarchically and involves managerial coordination, control, and accountability. Administrative officers are generally motivated by achieving institutional goals, and use planning and budgeting systems to assist in reaching departmental objectives that directly influence institutional outcomes (Birnbaum, 1988). On the other hand, the faculty's authority—derived from specialized training essential to delivering core organizational functions (Mintzberg, 1993)—is loosely coupled between academic departments as well as in relation to the administration. Academic units tend to operate within themselves and, while ostensibly related to the whole, their primary focus is on departmental research and teaching, mostly at the individual level. The faculty culture, as described by James Duderstadt (2004), "typically holds values that are not necessarily well aligned with those required to manage a complex institution. For example, the faculty values academic freedom and independence, whereas the management of the institution requires responsibility and accountability. Faculty members tend to be individualistic, highly entrepreneurial lone rangers, rather than the team players required for management" (p. 144).

The challenge, then, with dual authority in making decisions that effectively respond to the changing nature of higher education is to create enough cohesion between the administration and faculty that disagreements are not just tolerated but perceived as useful in creative problem solving. While this process may be less efficient, sound decisions developed through the participation of and trust between the administration and faculty are often most effective in managing external challenges. Critical to institutional decision making is the ability to respond to market forces affecting the institution while using the institution's educational purposes and distinctive mission as chief guides—in other words, decision making that is market-smart and mission-centered, a concept popularized by Robert Zemsky, Gregory Wegner, and William Massy (2006) in

Remaking the American University. In conclusion, Birnbaum's statement, "The greatest danger to higher education may not be that decisions are made too slowly because of the drag of consultation, but that they are made too swiftly and without regard for institutional core values" (2004, p. 7), is both a rebuttal to shared-governance critics and a caution to boards and administrators overwrought regarding efficiency.

Leadership in a Professional Bureaucracy

Organizational scholar Henry Mintzberg described higher education institutions as professional bureaucracies because of their democratic structure, which accords extensive autonomy to faculty. In these collegial organizations power is dispersed, requiring a different form of leadership than practiced in other types of organizations (Mintzberg, 1983). After extensive research on academic leadership, Cohen and March in their 1974 book, *Leadership and Ambiguity*, posited that because of higher education's diffusion of authority and decentralization of governance, presidential leadership is limited in its ability to affect outcomes. Rather, the role of the college president—as Charles Eliot stated during his inaugural address at Harvard College in 1869—is to be an "executive officer of deliberative bodies," thus requiring a leadership style that involves both collaboration and persuasion.

Collaborative leadership in American higher education continues today; after a year-long study of contemporary college and university presidents, the Association of Governing Boards published its *Statement of Board Responsibility for Institutional Governance* urging presidents and boards to "embrace integral leadership in which the president exerts a presence that is purposeful and consultative, deliberative but decisive" (2010, p. 1). In the spirit of collaboration, the statement called for a partnership among the president, board, and faculty (2010). Successful college and university presidents are often those who motivate and align leaders of various campus groups to accomplish institutional goals jointly. In the words of Robert Birnbaum (1992), "Leadership in higher education rests on a fundamental expectation that authority will be shared. Governance requires the interaction of many groups, and each group has one or more leaders" (p. xii). As a result, college and university

presidents must actively listen to constituent groups while they persuasively lead them toward common goals. Running a professional bureaucracy necessitates the leader to reconcile the disparate perspectives of campus constituencies and create enough cohesion around the institution's identity and educational mission.

Leaders create cohesion by fostering a strong sense of intuitional purpose. From his research on organizational culture, Gareth Morgan argues that cohesive organizations are those in which workers have a shared understanding of their reality: "Democratic leaders let the reality of a situation evolve from the definitions offered by their colleagues, listening to what is being said, summoning and integrating key themes, and evoking and developing imagery that captures the essence of the emergent system of meaning" (1986, p. 136). In professional bureaucracies, leaders who inspire campus constituents to take responsibility for their collective reality by participating in institutional decision making are better positioned to address higher education's challenges. Critical to making good decisions is clarity of institutional purpose, trust among internal constituent groups, and integral leadership in which multiple campus leaders facilitate wise decisions and their effective implementation.

Faculty Involvement in Shared Governance

Over the past 30 years there has been a slow erosion of faculty involvement in shared governance, due largely to growth in college and university administrations and to changing faculty interests away from institutional issues and toward individual research and professional pursuits (Gerber, 2014; Zemsky, Wegner & Massy, 2006). This expansion of university administration has squeezed faculty out of important conversations regarding the institution and reduced their participation in addressing institutional challenges. Although colleges and universities currently face complex decisions requiring faculty, board and administrative involvement, institutional decision making has been largely relegated to the administration (Bowen & Tobin, 2015; Gerber, 2014; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Schuster & Miller, 1989; Scott, 1997).

Further contributing to diminished faculty involvement in governance is the changing faculty composition due to increased numbers of contingent faculty, who until recently, have been uninvolved in academic governance (Kezar, 2012; Pierce, 2014). When retiring tenured faculty are replaced by nontenured faculty, there are fewer full-time faculty members available to shoulder governance responsibilities. Those who do, find the burden on their time significant. Further, when faculty citizenship is not rewarded through promotion and tenure considerations, faculty are less motivated to participate. A third cause for the decline in faculty involvement is disillusionment. Joanna Scott (1997), in *Death by Inattention: The Strange Fate of Faculty Governance,* writes of a "slow atrophy of the noble idea of shared governance" caused by disproportionate distrust among governance participants (p. 28). Whether faculty have grown cynical about shared governance because they have been squeezed out of institutional decision making or they feel unmotivated to participate due to their individual professional pursuits, their absence from institutional decision making, especially given the types of decisions colleges and universities now face, is consequential to institutional outcomes.

A groundbreaking study by Peter Eckel (2000) refutes the widely held idea that faculty participation regarding potentially divisive institutional issues, including program discontinuance, is counterproductive. His case study research on the role of shared governance in institutional hard decisions argues that faculty members can participate constructively in institutional decision making, even regarding decisions that could negatively impact the faculty. Eckel studied collaborative decision making involving program closure at four different institutions and found the way shared governance was practiced at these institutions helped facilitate institutional change. Moreover, joint decision making, he posits, provides a forum in which administrators and faculty discuss the seriousness of an issue while offering a mechanism through which groups can achieve high-stakes tasks and correct potential errors (Eckel, 2000). The process by which institutional decisions are made, especially those that directly and significantly impact the faculty, is as important to the faculty as the decision itself. A fair process in which faculty are able to constructively voice their opinions is critical to acceptance of decision outcomes.

Decision process for the areas in which faculty have primary responsibility—curriculum, pedagogy, tenure and promotion—is well defined and managed on most campuses through faculty governance structures such as an academic senate. However, structures that facilitate decision process for institution-wide decisions are less clear. In 2003, William Tierney and James Minor conducted a national survey on governance models, gathering data from more than 2,000 faculty and provosts at four-year institutions on the ways faculty participate in governance, the degree and effectiveness of that participation, and faculty attitudes toward it. While they found overwhelming support for shared governance at both public and private institutions, there was disagreement about how shared governance should be practiced. From open-ended questions, respondents offered definitions of shared governance that Tierney and Minor (2003) then grouped into three broad categories with the following results:

- 47 percent of respondents supported *"fully collaborative decision-making,"* which most closely resembles a collegial model of governance where faculty and administration make decisions jointly and consensus is the goal;
- 27 percent of respondents supported *"consultative decision-making,"* a more communicative governance model, where the faculty's opinion and advice is sought but the senior administration and the board have decision-making authority. The model revolves around information sharing and discussion rather than joint decision making;
- 26 percent of respondents supported *"distributed decision-making,"* where decisions are made by discrete groups responsible for specific issues. The model's premise is based in a belief that for certain areas of decision making, the faculty have a right to make decisions while, in other areas, the administration and board have authority (p. 9).

Tierney and Minor (2003) concluded that dissimilar perceptions on the meaning of shared governance as well as disagreement over the faculty's role in governance, lead to distrust. Lack of trust, and apathy caused by the belief that faculty voices were not taken seriously by the administration or board, were the two most significant barriers to meaningful faculty participation.

Similarly, Steven Bahls (2014) framed four separate models of shared governance differentiated by the variety of perspectives held by governance participants. The models include *Shared Governance as Equal Rights*,

Shared Governance as Consultation, *Shared Governance as Rules of Engagement*, and lastly, *Shared Governance as a System for Aligning Priorities* (Bahls, 2014, p. 25). Bahls argues that the last model, Shared Governance as a System of Aligning Priorities, is best suited to address current higher education challenges because it enables the active engagement of the faculty, administration and board in a system of checks and balances in which they take joint responsibility for identifying and pursuing a set of mission-driven priorities (2014). Critical to this and other successful governance models is the effective management of information. When information flows easily between governance constituents and an open exchange of ideas follows, each participant group is more able to fulfill its responsibility in shared governance.

Uncertainty about the meaning and process of shared governance, coupled with conflicting evidence about the level of faculty involvement in governance and institutional decision making, highlights the need for clarity regarding the faculty's role on individual campuses. Faculty governance wherein faculty committees manage their work and decisions concerning their teaching and research is clearly defined and essential, but at the same time this self-governance will not necessarily influence strategic, institution-wide decisions unless faculty are informed about and involved in decision making regarding the institution's challenges. The decisions ahead for colleges and universities require a level of shared governance that moves beyond the compartmentalization that frequently exists among board, administrative, and faculty governance structures. Utilizing shared governance more comprehensively, with better information flow, by meaningfully engaging governance constituents in decision and planning processes is necessary to produce a higher level of shared responsibility.

Engaging Governance in Institutional Strategy

Institutional strategy conveys the college or university's future intentions. Through the development of strategy, an institution discovers what it must do to strengthen its organizational capacity for long-term success.

The board is responsible for the strategic direction of the institution, which it accomplishes by delegating strategic planning to the president, and then in participating as a partner with the president, administration and faculty in strategy development, and finally in championing the plan's strategic initiatives. Effective strategic planning necessitate shared governance. As noted earlier in the AAUP *Statement of Governance,* managing the institution's future is an activity in which the board, administration and faculty have significant responsibility to the institution and to each other. Considerable emphasis is now placed on strategic planning and yet much less attention is paid to the governance structures and campus habits which enable effective and appropriate participation in decision-making throughout the development and implementation of the plan. Richard Morrill (2007), in *Strategic leadership: Integrating Strategy and Leadership in Colleges and Universities,* posits that strategic planning should be the central and defining feature of today's shared governance, and he argues that through the process of developing institutional strategy, leaders can best mobilize campus constituents to deal collectively and productively with change.

A university-wide standing committee, typically named the 'Planning' or 'Strategy Council', promoted by academic management scholar, George Keller (1983), is a decision-making model currently regaining importance on campuses because it facilitates meaningful and ongoing participation in strategic initiatives. Composed of administrative leaders and elected faculty representatives who serve on a rotating basis, this council is a permanent governance structure that meets regularly throughout the academic year. The work of the council involves continual environmental scanning, the alignment of strategic priorities with institutional resources, further refinement of strategies as circumstances change, and the monitoring of progress on the implementation of strategic priorities. The council's work is communicated widely to the campus community both formally in faculty, cabinet and board meetings as well as informally among colleagues. Unlike the more common strategic planning steering committee which disbands after the strategic plan is written, the work of the strategy council is ongoing, providing an active forum for strategic management in which campus thought-leaders collaborate, whereby greatly improving the plan's likelihood of continued support and success.

When managed well as a permanent governance structure that compliments the other existing governance structures on campus, strategy councils are an effective way to engage shared governance in addressing the issues for which meaningful participation is necessary from both the faculty and administration. Additionally, important linkages occur when meetings of the governing board are organized around the strategic priorities being addressed by the strategy council. Because of the councils' rotating membership, those campuses that have utilized the councils over an extended period of time have broad constituent awareness of their institution's key challenges and opportunities. Further, the individuals who have been elected to serve on the councils are more likely to feel that their ideas matter which in turn increases their commitment to the enterprise. The result is improved information flow and an integrated process of collaborative decision making.

When shared governance is organized around strategy development and execution, it provides well-established avenues for ongoing discussion and decision making regarding the institution's most important issues. Using shared governance in this way, the campus community is best able—on a regular basis—to engage productively in shaping the institution's future. The faculty, administration, and board come to expect participation and responsibility in the development of the institution's plans and their fulfillment, making effective implementation likely. When decisions are made and actions are taken in a coherent, consistent manner, a level of trust is created that allows for the ingenuity and calculated risk required to confront change. The effective use of a strategy council enables the engagement of the campus community in such a way as to align their interests for maximum positive impact.

In Summary

Wide variation exists in the meaning and practice of governance as well as the structures supporting it. Further, participation of the board, administration and faculty in institutional decision making differs, according to the nature of the decision, the planning and decision processes utilized, and the institution's culture and climate. While academe's dual authority of the faculty and administration creates a useful tension for better

decision making, it nevertheless can slow decision making whereby compromising an institution's ability to respond rapidly to the changing environment. However, this can be mitigated by employing the use of a strategy council that better integrates governance constituents in a central and continual process of analyzing and planning for the institution's future. As colleges and universities experience increased pressure from the external environment necessitating difficult institutional decisions—many of which require meaningful involvement from the faculty—careful evaluation and revitalization of effective governance practices is critical to successfully respond to needed change.

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