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The Effective Use of Staff Governance in Academic Leadership

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Introduction

Colleges and universities provide both the human capital development and often the research backbone for the economy to function at a high level. Simultaneously, institutions provide a tremendous social benefit for graduates and other stakeholders who make use of their emphasis on the arts, entertainment, and cultural development. This multi-dimensional role, one in which Clark Kerr referred to as the "multiversity" (Johnson, Kavanagh, & Mattson, 2003, p. 11), often results in a conflicting notion of purpose and management, with competition for business-like accountability with public sector intangible service. Burgess (2009) noted that the result is the perspective of the public university as a quasi-governmental agency.

The conflicting perspectives of higher education's role, and ultimately, purpose in serving the public good is highlighted in terms of how these institutions are governed, both internally and externally. Most public institutions make use of a politically appointed or elected governing board who manage by consensus (Borland, 2003). Historically, these governors have relied on a series of checks and balances that have included a clearly defined role for campus faculty and administrators (Borland, 2003). Other professionals on campus, typically termed 'staff' have also played a less visible, yet important role.

This body of staff in recent years has comprised the vast majority of higher education hiring. Staff members are classified as professionals working in such areas as advancement and alumni programs, athletics, business operations, and research and research compliance. As the faculty role has become increasingly segmented, these staff positions have taken on a greater importance in institutional operation. And although these positions have grown in importance, their conduit for access to decision-making has remained constricted to traditional notions of staff governance (Morris, Miller, Nadler, & Miles, 2008).

Staff governance is the process where staff, both line and professional, are involved in institutional decision-making (see Slaney, 1999 for an example of this definition). The process is reliant on administrative distribution of authority and is not based on legal standing, and subsequently, is an important element in institutional organizational behavior, particularly when administrators and leaders attempt to make substantial decisions and chart courses that impact the future and existence of the university (see Leach, 2008 for a general discussion of these elements).

The current study was designed to explore how staff governance and administrative leaders perceive a more effective use of their efforts in institutional decision making.

Background of the Study

Shared governance has been one of the hallmarks of higher education, allowing various stakeholders opportunities to provide input into the decision-making process (Miller, 2003). This activity of shared governance has been dominated by discussions of faculty involvement in governance, student

participation in governance, and even trustees and overseers participation in institutional decision-making. Yet, the largest segment of higher education labor and investment has become, among various definitions, staff members. Whether staff members include traditional line staff, such as secretaries, administrative assistants, and accountants, or professional administrative staff in development, and athletic administrators, these individuals have become a major force on college campuses. Despite this rise in presence and prominence, little understanding of their role in shared governance has been explored (Morris, Miller, Nadler, & Miles, 2008).

Conceptually, shared governance is the process of involving many different actors in making decisions or choosing outcome directions that serve the best interest of the whole (Rivera, 2008). A variety of perspectives have been offered on shared governance, including many criticisms that shared governance no longer is appropriate for the corporate-resembling college (Waugh, 1998). Other perceptions of shared governance suggest a pro-rated approach to delegated authority, where the level of autonomy to make decisions, or have input into decisions, is correlated with a negotiated level of delegation (Miller, 1999).

There is some evidence, then, that supports the concept that the more constituents are involved in making decisions, the more they are likely to accept and support the decision outcome (Rivera, 2008; see also Taylor, 1911; Thompson, 1967). Additionally, there is added value in having staff involved in the decision-making process, as often they are the most directly involved in working with students, providing off-campus services, and support research activities. Staff members are also more likely to be available on campus for consultation and decision making on a regular basis, regardless of summer or holiday calendars. The potential shortcomings of involving staff in governance activities include the potential for less institutions investment and a greater likelihood of changing jobs and institutions, the potential for the inability to see the broader perspective of campus activities and mission, and a highly disaggregate definition of what constitutes "staff" (adapted from Worthington & Gwaltney, 1969).

Research Methods

Data were collected for the study through a researcher developed survey instrument. The instrument content was derived from statements identified by an expert panel of 15 staff governance unit leaders at land-grant universities around the country. These 15 staff governance leaders participated in a three-round Delphi study where they were asked to identify and rate their agreement with strategies for effective staff involvement in governance. A total of 14 of the 15 staff governance leaders participated in all three rounds of the Delphi instrument, and strategies that had the strongest agreement about their potential effectiveness were then placed in an electronic survey. These 15 items were structured onto a survey instrument that was then pilot tested with one staff senate of 23 members. They provided narrative feedback and completed the survey, rating each item on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale where 1=Strong Disagreement that the strategies would be helpful in making a more effective staff governance, progressing to 5=Strong Agreement that the strategy would make the staff governance unit more effective. The pilot test had a reliability alpha of .7298.

The survey was then sent, via email in the winter of 2008-2009, to 225 randomly selected staff government individuals who had been identified through staff governance website portals. Four-year institutions were randomly identified by consulting the 2007 Higher Education Directory (Burke, 2007), with up to three staff senators identified at any given institution. Ultimately, 115 institutions were

identified and searched online to produce a sample of 225.

Findings

A total of 161 surveys were returned for a 71.5% response rate. This response rate was achieved by utilizing three reminder email messages to non-respondents. These individuals rated all 15 items on the survey instrument, and the average of the mean ratings was 4.31. The high ratings were consistent with the development of the survey instrument, meaning that the 15 items included had high levels of agreement from the expert panel that created the strategies.

Five items had overall mean ratings above 4.6, indicating the strongest levels of agreement by study participants. These items were perceived to be the most effective staff governance strategies. As shown in Table 1, these included having dealing with important issues that are relevant to campus (mean 4.78; SD .4138), having a staff governance unit that is visible to the campus community (mean 4.71; SD .4972), making use of a system that retains strong leaders (mean 4.67; SD .2891) and a system that has smooth systems in place to deal with issues (mean 4.66; SD .5748), and a staff governance environment that has support from higher administration on initiatives to improve campus environments for staff (mean 4.6; SD .3489).

Two items had agreement levels below the 4.0 (agreement) threshold, including that staff governance effectively involves both line and professional staff (mean 3.99; SD .3788), and the culture of faculty on campus supports collaboration with staff (mean 3.90; SD .2387). The remaining eight strategies were rated by respondents within the 4.00 and 4.51 range, indicating that as a group staff senators agreed that the strategies identified are important elements in an effective staff governance unit.

Discussion

This is an initial, descriptive study of what can make staff governance bodies work better. The survey creation, and to a large extent validation through this administration, reflects priority areas that academic leaders can emphasize in improving collaborative governance. These items, consistent with their positive ratings for potentially improving the effectiveness of staff governance bodies, could be categorized into three areas: the context of shared staff governance, the protocol used to implement staff governance, and those who participate.

The context suggested to in the findings represents a need for mutual respect and communication by all layers of administration on a college campus. This is not unique to staff governance, but might be highlighted due to the surface-level disparities in titles, salaries, visibility, etc. If academic leaders, however, are interested in building collaborative, team-based environments for decision making, they will have to look at contextual areas such as providing support to improve the campus environment for staff, support efforts to improve work environments, providing important and relevant issues to staff senates to work with, and helping to promote a culture that values staff input.

Protocol issues reflect the systems that staff governance units have in place and make use of to accomplish their business. These involve a smooth system of work, proper recognition of participants, a critical mass of staff involved in governance, and dealing with important issues.

The third area supported by participant ratings had to do with the staff members participating in shared

governance on behalf of the staff. Staff governance bodies must find ways to identify, involve, and retain qualified, strong leaders who will command the respect of their peers, and others on campus.

Ironically, in such tumultuous financial times, virtually all of the strategies identified are low to no cost activities. Some of the strategies, such as recognition of staff members, might have actual monetary costs tied to them, but for the most part, the strategies staff members identified as most important to making their governance body work had to do with communications, respect, and an intangible commitment on the part of the institution to a democratic process of decision-making. As academic leaders are forced to address multiple business related issues (tuition, fees, capital costs, legislative relations, etc.), they have at their discretion the ability to significantly improve the decision-making process, and potential morale, on their campuses through the recognition and stronger involvement of key constituents such as staff through identifiable strategies such as those presented in this study.

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Table 1.
Effective Staff Governance Strategies
N=161

Strategy	Mean	Range	SD
Staff governance deals with important issues that are relevant to campus	4.78	2	.4138
Staff governance unit is visible to the campus community	4.71	2	.4972
The system of staff governance retains strong leaders	4.67	2	.2891
The system of staff governance has smooth systems in place to deal with issues	4.66	2	.5748
Support from higher administration on initiatives to improve campus environments for staff	4.6	3	.3489
Staff governance unit members are well qualified to hold their posts	4.51	2	.6948
Staff governance members recognize the importance of representing their peers	4.25	3	.7110

Campus leadership turns to staff governance unit for personnel to appoint to committees	4.25	3	.5642
The system of staff governance involves the best and brightest from campus	4.18	4	.3489
Support from higher administration on initiatives to improve work environments for staff	4.12	2	.4392
The campus' staff are seen as peers/equals with faculty	4.11	3	.3238
Staff governance unit deals with issues relevant to the campus community	4.02	3	.4389
The system of staff governance has a practice of encouraging participation	4.00	3	.7872
Staff governance effectively involves both line and professional staff	3.99	2	.3788
The culture of faculty on campus supports collaboration with staff	3.90	3	.2387