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Modeling Shared Governance at the School and Department Level

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Introduction

Without question, the concept and practice of shared governance is critical to the health and vitality of any institution of higher education. Perhaps no other characteristic distinguishes American higher education more than this system of participatory governance and oversight. Democratic involvement in institutional decision-making, both operational and strategic, and at the institutional, school, and even academic department level, is necessary for institutional effectiveness and efficiency (Eckel, 2000). However, the issue is not without controversy, as shared governance is second only to tenure as most debated topic in academe (Tierney & Holley, 2005).

The tradition of shared governance rests on the assumption that faculty should hold a substantive role in decision-making, and the most visible vehicle for faculty involvement is typically a faculty senate or some similar body. Such senates currently exist on the campuses of more than 90 percent of America's four-year colleges and universities.

Over the past decade, however, several trends have placed unexpected pressures on institutions of higher learning. These include extreme fluctuations in state budgets, concerns about the rising costs of higher education, calls for greater accountability from all educational institutions, increasing competition from new postsecondary providers, including for-profit organizations, and the explosive growth in distance learning. These trends have led to greater scrutiny of institutional decision-making and calls for a "restructuring" of academic governance that would improve productivity and control costs.

Such demands have spurred debate about the role of faculty in governance. Critics of existing arrangements often argue that faculty governance in general, and faculty senates in particular, inhibit responsive decision-making. These critics bemoan the lethargic pace of decision-making when faculty are involved and expect to reach consensus. Defenders of the faculty's role in shared governance, on the other hand, contend that faculty involvement in decision-making has positive effects on academic freedom and educational quality. They maintain that the university is not a business; it is one of the world's oldest organizations and has withstood various external pressures, including those of a changing marketplace, by a deliberative, participatory, and consensual decision-making approach.

What is Shared Governance?

Shared governance means different things to different people and to different constituencies. The concept of shared governance, although widely used to characterize individual and constituency involvement in institutional decision making, is often greatly misunderstood. Ideally, the term "shared governance" can be thought of as a mutual sharing of responsibility by faculty, administration, staff, appointed personnel, and students, for making both operational and strategic decisions about institutional mission, policies, and budget and finance priorities. Under shared governance, each stakeholder or constituency endeavors to think and act in terms of the good of the institution as a whole

and to work collaboratively with others involved in the process in order to reach agreement or consensus before making final decisions.

According to Olsen (2009) the phrase is “so hackneyed that is becoming what some linguists call an “empty” or “floating” signifier, a term so devoid of determinate meaning that it takes on whatever significance a particular speaker gives it at the moment” (page 1). Another group renders a much more harsh judgment of shared governance “governance systems virtually makes inevitable the inability of institutions and systems to set priorities, focus missions, and implement choice among academic programs”. (Benjamin et al., 1993, pg. 28).

Shared governance as a system of organizational control and influence is predicated on two distinctly different forms of authority, one legal and the other professional (Birnbaum, 2003). Legal authority is the basis for role and responsibilities of the institutional governing board and professional authority justifies the role of the faculty. Ambiguity in delineating these two forms of authority has been the primary source of much conflict and acrimony between these two entities.

Two or three generations ago, shared governance was not a significant concept or practice. Most decisions were made rather arbitrarily by the top echelon of campus administrators. In a small college setting, the president, with or without the influence of the Board of Trustees, could and often did consult no one when it came to making appointments. Governance was simple if autocratic. This model is obviously no longer in use, though it is still not uncommon or surprising to find college presidents who want to have their own way. Campus governance has indeed become more shared, but, as this paper emphasizes, the expansion of input has created its own problems.

A provost at a major state university has observed that shared governance “is a delicate balance between faculty and staff participation in planning and decision-making processes, on the one hand, and administrative accountability on the other.” (Olson, 2009). While shared governance has become a matter of faith on most campuses, the lines of delineation have not yet been made distinct.

Moreover, the notion of shared governance itself is not any longer universally respected or endorsed. In 1995, for example, the University of California Board of Regents voted to end affirmative action in admissions, hiring, and contracting (Curtis V. Smith, “The Decline of Shared Governance in Higher Education”). This decision was taken against the advice of both the university president and the faculty (ibid). This was and remains a significant setback for shared governance if only because California then and currently is the largest university system in the country.

Shared governance is a careful balance between university faculty and staff participation in strategic and operational planning and decision-making, and institutional accountability. To some, this means that faculty should have primacy in all significant decisions regarding institutional operations. To others, it means that faculty and staff share equally in voicing opinion and direction regarding institutional mission, vision, and decision making. And yet to others, it means that the board or governing entity share sole responsibility for all strategic decisions, while faculty and staff can participate “if they wish” in setting operational processes and procedures.

At its basic core, shared governance is arguably about the power and locus of control in decision making. Because institutional “governance concerns power: who is in charge; who makes decisions; who has a voice; and how loud that voice is” (Rosovsky, 1990, p.261). It is the balance of power and

the control of power exercised in influence over decision-making that makes the matter so terribly contentious. However another fundamental assumption in shared governance is that shared decision-making is facilitated among a coalition of interest groups, based on power and conflict, not optimizing objectives (Baldrige, 1971). Considering the stakeholders involved and the ways in which they interact helps answer the question of who “has a voice” and how “loud” that voice is.

The historic argument for direct faculty participation in institutional decision making focused centrally on the faculty’s competence to address academic matters. As early as 1858, the President of the University of Michigan suggested that faculty have province and sovereignty over pedagogy and the curriculum (Tappan, 1961). This particular principle was recognized and honored for nearly a century until the publication of the seminal “Statement of Government of Colleges and Universities” in 1967. This joint publication of the American Association of University Professors, American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges legitimated the role of the faculty in matters of academic governance and decision-making. This joint statement articulated the two fundamental and central principles for what we know now as shared governance: (1) important areas of action involve at one time or another the initiating capacity and decision making participation of all the institutional components, and (2) difference in the weight of each voice, from one point to the next, should be determined by the reference to the responsibility of each component for the particular matter at hand (218).

The term “shared” should not necessarily mean that every constituency who wishes to be can be involved in every stage of decision-making. Nor does it imply that any particular individual or constituency exercise complete control over the processes or their outcomes. The term “shared” should imply that no one person or constituency is capriciously making strategic decisions without the input of key institutional constituencies and stakeholders.

The most pressing matters relative to shared governance typically focus on three principle areas – budget and strategic planning, academic and academic personnel policies, and the selection and review of academic administration and administrators. Each of these three areas of institutional decision making has significant impact on faculty and faculty work and by virtue of this fact, faculty argue most frequently that their “voice” be heard and that they have direct participating in decisions in these areas.

Most institutions recognize and acquiesce on faculty authority over academic policies and procedures. Faculty possess and exercise primary control over the academic curriculum, policies regarding student admission criteria, standards for academic progress, and the conferral of degrees. At many colleges and universities, the faculty also set criteria for faculty evaluation, including those for promotion and tenure.

Arguably the area of greatest disagreement with regard to authority, institutional decision-making, and shared governance surrounds institutional finances and budget, and strategic planning. Presidents and institutional governing boards see strategic agenda setting and the allocation of institutional resources as their principal responsibility. However, this particular viewpoint is not often shared by faculty. Faculty believe, and believe strongly, that they should have primacy in setting the institution’s strategic foci and future.

Stakeholders in Shared Governance

Wherein there is no ideal model of shared governance, there is also no ideal “mix” of who should, or should not be, involved directly in shared governance. The depth and breadth of stakeholder involvement varies as dramatically as the institutions committed to and involved in such important work. Most typically involved in collective bargaining activities are instructional faculty, executive level administrators, key midlevel management and support staff, collective bargaining unit representatives (if the institution has collective bargaining agreements for faculty, staff, or both), boards of trustees or similar governing bodies, and often other constituencies, including but not limited to university alumni, student governance body leadership (President), institutional affiliated foundation representatives, and in some instances – community representatives. When the institutions in question are religiously affiliated, principals and laypersons from the specific denomination are often involved.

When considering the involvement of faculty, the most frequent example includes one or members of the faculty governance body executive leadership representing the entire faculty. A question also arises as to whether or not all faculty should have equal voice in decision making relative to shared governance. At most institutions, part-time, adjunct, and non-tenure track faculty are excluded in shared governance processes. There is no ideal “mix” of representation. Some of the groups have multiple representatives involved (trustees), while others have a single representative (professional staff, students, alumni).

It would also be remiss to ignore the political factor. Not all departmental faculty members are equal even if we exclude those who are not tenure-track. Fairly or not, junior members of the faculty usually assume that their first priority is to achieve tenure and that taking sides on an issue that is splitting the department down the middle or would at least offend one or more senior colleagues who happen to sit on promotion and tenure committees is a legitimate professional concern.

In considering the composition of who and how many should be directly involved in institutional shared governance, the issue at hand is not which constituency or stakeholder is most central to the wellbeing of the institution and as such, should have final decision making authority with the approval of an institution’s governing board. The issue is which group must of necessity; make the everyday daily decisions that allow the institution to operating in an orderly, effective, and efficient manner (Simplico, 2008).

Shared Governance at the School and Department Level

The principles of shared governance, modeled at the school and department level can have significant benefit to faculty (individually and collectively), academic courses and programs, administrative operational and strategic decision making, and ultimately, teaching and student learning. In an environment of trust and transparency, the principles of shared governance promote and sustain collegiality, collaboration, cooperation, and transparency – all virtues necessary to maximize teaching and learning.

Among the more obvious and immediate benefits of modeling shared governance at the school or department level are improved communication, trust and mutual respect, transparent and improved decision making, and expanded and improved leadership development and capacity. Some deans or department chairs have spent a good part of their career earning and retaining the confidence and respect of their colleagues. But this is not always a useful position. Chairs who remain in their position

for several years and engage in successful and productive administration may actually be left by their colleagues to simply “handle everything” and not bother anyone.

Faculty involvement in the shared governance process can lead to increased levels of awareness and understanding of broader issues within the school or department, including but not limited to student and faculty recruitment, curriculum development (including both discipline-specific and general education), budgeting, and faculty evaluation. Early involvement in shared governance at the department and school level can better prepare faculty for University-wide governance responsibilities later in their academic careers. Also, early exposure to and involvement in shared governance activities at the school and department level might also provide junior faculty with additional development opportunities that will improve their effectiveness and efficiency in serving on university-wide committees and task forces.

For those faculty members who may have future administrative aspirations, involvement in school and departmental faculty governance will provide additional opportunities to develop administrative acumen and working knowledge of broader school and institutional contexts, two characteristics important for administrative productivity and impact. Also, early involvement in faculty governance activities can provide academic deans and department chairpersons with opportunities to identify individuals who may be good candidates for future important committee or administrative assignments.

An often overlooked but potentially critical aspect in the shared governance process is the sometimes awkward role that is played by an interim department chair or college dean. An interim can easily be an individual who had to be dragged kicking and screaming into the job and is counting the days until it will be possible to return to full-time teaching and research. The opposite extreme includes a person who really does want the position on a permanent basis and, usually as the result of inexperience, is wary of alienating colleagues involved in decision-making processes. Either way, the interim nevertheless cannot simply mark time. He/she may be confronted by difficult personnel issues or budgetary matters.

Real and Perceived Challenges to Shared Governance

According to Gerber (2001), critics of shared governance argue that changing conditions in higher education, matched with increasing public demand for accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency call for completely new approaches to institutional governance. Many of higher education’s critics contend that corporate models of management should replace higher education’s cherished collegial model of shared governance if institutions are to fulfill their missions, serve the public interest, and “survive” into the future. Articulated demands to revise existing governance structures and systems to allow institutional flexibility and leverage proactive response in an expedited fashion appear to be based on two suspect assumptions; first that today’s colleges and universities have not been sufficiently responsive enough, and second, that speed in decision making is an asset to institutions (Birnbaum, 2003).

According to a report by the AGB (2001), “many governing boards, faculty members, and chief executives believe that internal governance arrangement have become so cumbersome that time decisions are difficult to make, and faction often are able to impede the decision-making process” (pg. 3). This particular association has also cited a number of issues that they believe compromise effective shared governance, including the increasing use of contingent faculty (part-time and adjunct), increased legislative/political control over decision making, increased demands for public accountability, and

increased expectations for “how” shared governance is achieved (expected adherence to best practices)– disciplinary specific and regional accrediting agencies.

In their recent work, Schwartz et al. (2009), identified a list of potential barriers and impede effective governance including inadequate time for decision making, lack of mutual understanding and respect among stakeholders and constituencies, inflexible governance policies and practices, institutional leadership (particularly presidents) who either cannot or will not effectively engage their governing boards and faculty, and a lack of trust between the board and the faculty.

Conclusion

Continued decreasing public confidence in higher education, increased demands for demonstrable evidence of operational effectiveness and efficiency, and massive cuts to public education funding are immediate and pressing concerns facing higher education. Threats to institutional autonomy from disciplinary-specific and regional accrediting bodies also complicates matters. It is unlikely that these pressures will subside any time soon. Without collaborative and informed decision making through shared governance, our ability to successfully respond to these challenges and make decisions that protect the academy will be severely hampered.

The best decisions are informed decisions that are made based upon multiple inputs, frames of reference and viewpoints, and divergent opinion. Given the need to make extremely difficult and time sensitive decisions regarding budget cuts, resource allocation and reallocation, and with unfortunate frequency, decisions regarding academic program reduction and, in some cases, elimination, shared governance is not simply desirable, it is a vital necessity. The ability to navigate successfully the myriad challenges and opportunities facing higher education will depend, in large part, on the degree to which faculty are participants in charting their preferred future.

Modeling shared governance at the department and school level can assure that all faculty are acutely aware of broader institutional, school, and departmental challenges, directly involve faculty in decision making and planning, and develops collaboration, trust, and transparency.

Also beneficial are the opportunities for professional development, particularly for junior faculty.

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