Tools   ADVANCE-Institutional Transformation

2022

Setting the Stage for Equitable Faculty Shared Decision-Making

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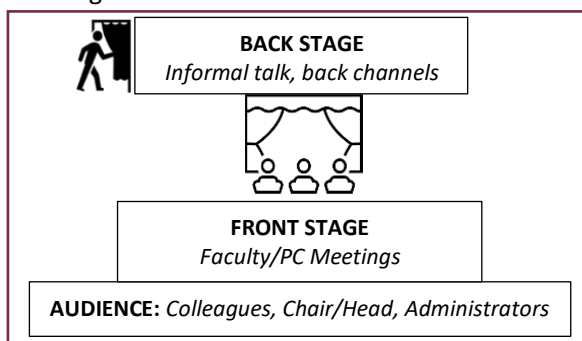# SETTING THE STAGE FOR EQUITY: FACULTY SHARED DECISION-MAKING

Why Focus on Shared Decision-Making? The most consequential decisions regarding faculty careers are decided collectively by peers, including tenure, promotions, and annual merit pay raises. The shared decision making inherent in faculty governance is a type of collaboration that faculty experience in unequal ways.

While most departments have *formal* procedures and written policies, academia remains dominated by *informal* ways of functioning that allow gender and racial inequalities to persist. UMass ADVANCE survey results indicate that **women faculty are less clear on personnel processes** than men, and **women faculty members from underrepresented racial minority groups are the least clear on tenure and promotion processes**. Women faculty are often uncertain about their next career steps.

Creating equitable practices around shared decision-making will improve **transparency** and **trust** among colleagues, supporting the **inclusion** and **retention** of women faculty and faculty of color, especially those at junior ranks. *How can governance be reinvented to be more equitable for women faculty and faculty of color?*

The Front & Back Stage of Decision-Making
Imagine your faculty meeting as a theatre production.[1] The **front stage** is where the formal behavior happens, with the cast of characters openly performing decision-making duties guided by the **script**: departmental bylaws and written governance documents. We expect everyone to follow the script, but the plot thickens because every production has a backstage**.**

BACK STAGE
Informal talk, back channels

FRONT STAGE
Faculty/PC Meetings

AUDIENCE: *Colleagues, Chair/Head, Administrators*

The **backstage** is where informal decision-making happens, in hallway conversations or behind office doors. When the backstage is visible and democratic, it provides space for faculty to informally convene

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with trusted colleagues and discuss their thoughts before formal votes. This can be especially important for junior faculty members who might be uncomfortable speaking up in faculty meetings, however the backstage has nearly disappeared during the pandemic. Left unchecked, the backstage can create inequities, if powerful faculty members leverage their influence to sway voting outcomes. Faculty members left out of "backstage" conversations in their department can feel excluded from key decision-making.

Departments vary widely in terms of how decisions are made. Bylaws govern formal voting procedures, including which faculty ranks can vote on which decisions, and which voting processes will be followed (ranked-choice, secret ballot, etc.). Bylaws typically include procedures for decisions around:

- Recommending faculty hires
- Evaluating Chairs/Heads and suggesting Chair appointments to Dean
- Tenure and promotion processes
- Electing or appointing faculty to committees
- Changing curricula
- Recommending office /lab space allocations
- Merit deliberations related to annual reviews and pay increases
- Adopting/amending bylaws

Gaps between formal bylaws and informal decision-making reproduce inequalities by race and gender. For example, each faculty member *formally* gets one vote, certain groups – typically senior faculty and those historically "overserved" in universities – have more *informal* influence on voting outcomes. Decision-making can be fraught, and many departments continue to use decision-making models premised on a less diverse faculty, where more faculty were included in the backstage.

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[1] We owe inspiration for this metaphor to dramaturgical theory, developed by sociologist Erving Goffman (1956).

THREE STEPS FOR EQUITABLE SHARED DECISION-MAKING

1. Review how your department uses bylaws, and check for transparency.

Ask yourselves, and discuss as a faculty:

- How accessible are the bylaws? If you had to find your department bylaws in the next 5 minutes, would you be able to locate them?
- How often do you reference your bylaws? For what purposes?
- What might be the benefits of using vs. not using bylaws?
- Who might be affected most if the bylaws are not readily available?
- How often are the bylaws updated to reflect actual practice?

The Provost's Office keeps current copies of departmental bylaws. Best practice is to update bylaws yearly to reflect current routines. Faculty feel clearer about decision-making when their department has new or recently revised documents. Some bylaws define governance to center equity and support faculty by naming potential conflicts, such as "working through tensions" and "competing agendas" while "protecting both collegial relations and each other's time, space, and academic identities."

2. Incorporate inclusive approaches from other campus units.

- Set meeting agendas in advance and share documents, allowing all faculty to contribute.
- Allow anonymous voting or feedback to the chair/head. iClickers can be checked out from the library, and can also be used as a straw poll before the official vote to gauge consensus.
- Create space in meetings for each faculty member to have a voice. Consider who has not spoken and invite them to speak. Take a pause if you have already shared your thoughts.
- Consider that some faculty might not be comfortable publicly disagreeing with colleagues.
  - One approach is to not vote on a matter the first time it is brought up.
  - Have 1-2 separate discussion meetings as a whole faculty before the official vote.
  - Provide an interim in between the discussion and voting meetings for faculty to discuss one-on-one with chair/head/PC member, or to provide anonymous feedback.
  - The Chair/Head can summarize the feedback to allow different voices be heard than those who are speaking up in the meeting.

- Write community agreements that center respect for diverse voices. Some departments have "ground rules" on with clear steps for respectful conflict resolution.
- Include assistant professors and NTT faculty in personnel committees. Their participation in governance improves transparency and inclusion.
- Consider writing cultural standards documents to clearly outline requirements and expectations for tenure and promotion. Keep documents updated and in line with university rules.
- Ensure clear procedures are in place: Transparency works when bylaws reflect reality and are treated as living documents, and expectations are regularly communicated.

3. Discuss equitable departmental decision-making with colleagues through case studies.

See an example below and discuss the following:

- How might faculty respond if they recognize inequitable processes of decision-making?
- How could conversations about decision-making improve transparency and provide more faculty with voice?

> **Case Study: Hiring Behind the Scenes.** Dr. N is an assistant professor whose department uses ranked choice voting, and every member of the faculty votes on the selection of candidates in the hiring process. Dr. N notices how a lot of things seem to go on behind the scenes with hiring, and the procedures of the search committee are not always transparent. Dr. N expresses surprise at the "back channel" activities of the process. People talk about candidates outside of faculty meetings, try to learn how Dr. N ranked candidates on confidential ballots, and "campaign" for hires. Dr. N believes that the search committees do their best, but also thinks the process depends on who is on the hiring committee, as well as the back channeling. Dr. N has concerns about how some people have more influence in hiring, and has come to you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- UMass ADVANCE Chair's Checklist for Equitable Decision-Making
- UMass ADVANCE Shared Decision-Making Best Practices
- UMass ADVANCE Equitable Peer Review Panel Templates
- Massachusetts Society of Professors (MSP) Union Faculty contract at UMass Amherst
- Catalyst's Are You an Empathetic Leader? Quiz
- Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research, Lab Meeting Facilitation
- The Transformative Academic Facilitator Toolkit TAFT tool