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Reframing Shared Governance

Rediscovering the Soul of Campus Collaboration

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This article explores an alternative perspective to the traditional combative nature of faculty–administrative relations on university campuses. More specifically, it suggests a reframing of the role and purpose of faculty or university senates to capture the collaboration at the heart of shared university governance.

Keywords: *shared governance; faculty–administration relations; collaboration; academic governance; faculty senate; university senate; academic leadership; faculty leadership; reframing*

Shared governance has a long, proud, and frustrating history in higher education—and the ongoing search for productive ways to involve faculty and administrative leadership in joint decision making has remained at the center of both the pride and the frustration. Universities and colleges are distinctive in their commitment to participative governance and for good reasons. The pursuit of knowledge and academic excellence is an ambitious and ambiguous goal. Plain and simple, it is not easy running a contemporary university—a complex enterprise that must function well on many different levels and whose challenges and opportunities only expand with the growing global economy.

The university, for example, has a core mission that is exciting and daunting: to generate and disseminate knowledge for multiple audiences across multiple media and disciplines, to foster the safety and the psychosocial and cognitive growth of a diverse student body, and to serve relevant campus communities. At the same time, universities confront a host of everyday leadership and organizational challenges—from setting priorities and balancing tight budgets to recruiting talent in a competitive market, overseeing a large and expensive physical plant, and more. They also face seemingly unlimited opportunities to do more and expand institutional impact—new community partnerships, global alliances, programs, services, and outreach. With such diverse and demanding work, universities need all the good minds they can get—and a strong and collaborative partnership between faculty and administration helps to bear the heavy load. Shared governance brings a range of talents and energy to the table, provides continuity in the face of administrative turnover, and enacts important campus values like the collaborative search for truth and respect for demonstrated expertise.

Faculty senates are the most visible formal vehicle for academic shared governance, and more than 90% of U.S. 4-year colleges and universities have them (Tierney & Minor, 2003). As intended, their fundamental purpose is positive and additive: employ collective campus intelligence to tackle the expanding, increasingly complicated, and ambiguous work of the university. The reality of the experience and outcomes, as Bradshaw and Fredette (in press) describe in their reflection on university senate leadership—and as research and experience confirm (e.g., Baldridge & Kemerer, 1976; Birnbaum, 1989; Campbell, 2003; Lieberman, 1969; Mintzberg & Rose, 2003; Morphew, 1999; Tierney & Minor, 2003)—tells a different yet consistent story. Faculty and administration are frustrated with academic governance in general—and faculty senates in particular—and it is easier to espouse shared governance than to enact it.

A national survey of 750 4-year academic institutions, for example, found widespread dissatisfaction (Tierney & Minor, 2003). Administrators often saw senates as reactive, slow moving, and a barrier to decision making; faculty members found academic departments and campus committees more productive and satisfying avenues for influence. For both groups, senates were often seen as "drains" on precious time needed for other important university work. Even on campuses marked by trust, shared commitment and values, and the best of intentions, a healthy percentage of faculty and administrators had low confidence in campus senates as a mechanism

for facilitating the best of what shared governance—of what productive faculty involvement in campus decision making—could be.

The Tierney and Minor (2003) findings should give the academy pause. They also beg for a major intervention—a different way of understanding and enacting representative bodies like university senates—lest faculty and campus administrative leadership collude in sustaining senate processes that Lieberman (1969) characterized almost 40 years ago as "institutionalized incompetence." There must be a better way to enact shared governance through representative bodies like university senates—and Bradshaw and Fredette (in press) give us a clue as to what that might be.

What if we change the way that we interpret and frame the fundamental work of faculty senates? Shared governance has collaboration at its core, and by extension, senate work should be defined as faculty and administration cooperation, team work, joined forces, work as allies, and pooled team resources.[1] Traditionally, however, faculty senates have been seen as political entities—assemblies of individuals with clear and different vested interests—and they often act as if they serve two primary functions: (a) as advocates for faculty interests and (b) as watchdogs to guard turf and prevent what faculty see as "bad" administrative decisions. The reactive and adversarial nature of the two functions is obvious—as is their potential to reinforce a false sense of separation between faculty and administration and to magnify the widening gap between these two essential campus partners. Although a political framing of the fundamental purpose of faculty senate makes theoretical sense in a campus world defined by scarce resources, shifting power relationships, and enduring needs and differences, in practice it creates and sustains antagonistic dynamics between faculty and administration that neither intend nor relish (Gallos, 2002).

The growing complexity of university work and rising public expectations for accountability and efficiency (Birnbaum, 2000) will only continue to increase the number of university administrators at all levels and also the need for new and expanded ways for faculty and administration to interact with and influence each other. Faculty and administrative work have different rhythms, pacing, priorities, and focus that contribute to different ways of seeing and interpreting campus reality (e.g., Bedeian, 2002; Gallos, 2002). These divergent perspectives enrich institutional planning and decision making. Birnbaum (1991) warns, however, that the benefits only come with careful tending of campus relationships to discourage faculty and administrative silos—isolated subcommunities where faculty and administrators largely relate to and communicate within their own subgroup. In such siloed and politicized campus worlds, faculty see administrators as suspect bureaucrats, while administrators see faculty as ponderous barriers to efficiency and responsiveness in a fast-moving world. Institutionalized interactions between the two groups, as in faculty senates, serve as battle grounds for resolving fundamental questions of "Whose reality is right?" and "Who is really in charge of this campus anyway?"

Reframing faculty senates-in-practice from political to collaborative entities breaks the competitive stalemate. It also expands senate options for contribution and influence. Bradshaw and Fredette's (in press) exploration of senate leadership-in-action, for example, is filled with politically based language that reinforces limited beliefs about the basic work of a university senate. According to the authors, senates largely react or dissent: They check, balance, monitor, bring a measure of distrust, oppose, challenge, question, oversee, critically and skeptically examine proposed agendas, tease out competitive advantages and power gains, resist existing power relations, and so on. Such thinking traps shared governance in a world of winners and losers. It relegates faculty to the role of little David battling a proactive and powerful campus Goliath—and senate agendas to a steady stream of reports from and about various administrative players. It also overlooks an important opportunity for faculty to lead.

Beyond the traditional, political senate focus of guarding against the errors and misdeeds of administrative others rests a powerful and generative faculty role—the opportunity to initiate, propose, and lead campus change. How, for example, can faculty draw on their intimate campus knowledge to propose bottom-up strategies for increasing university revenues rather than automatically lock into opposition to what they see as unfair and administrative-proposed budget cuts? Or how can faculty design ways to support and enhance administrative effectiveness, not just mechanisms for questioning or evaluating it? And equally important, how can faculty senators engage their campus constituents in the same kinds of proactive leadership?

A collaborative perspective on senate work is far from Pollyannaish. It is steeped in research and experience from both the action sciences (e.g., Argyris, 1993, 1999; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1992) and the positive organizational sciences (e.g., Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000), and it seeks to reclaim the intended collaborative foundations of academic shared governance. It asks faculty senates to balance—not replace—their reactivity with proactivity, wed their strong advocacy with strong inquiry (Argyris

& Schon, 1992), and take the lead in moving closer to the real joint decision making that campuses espouse—and so desperately need. University senates become forums for shared understanding, not battlefields for campus control: places where faculty and administration regularly come together to suggest, listen, and learn—and where both look forward to the exchange.

The transition will not be easy or quick—too many years of combat and suspicion have socialized campus players to the rules of the political game (Bergquist, 1992; Cohen, 1996; Frost & Taylor, 1996). However, Tierney and Minor (2003) remind us that the time has come to take action—and senate leadership can propose and foster the change. University senates that fill their agendas by "looking for complicity, collusion, silencing, and diversion of important debates" (Bradshaw & Fredette, in press) may be vigilant watchdogs. They may also win the battle but lose the war—and the opportunity to serve as the agents of change and opportunity that Bradshaw and Fredette (in press) suggest. Faculty governance is not distinct from leadership as the authors assert:

> Leadership, as I define it, is setting the vision and doing strategic planning. Governance is the check and balance or the "loyal opposition" where the leadership vision is subjected to rigorous reflection and critical thinking to ensure it is robust and appropriate for the University and the times/context . . . [and] that the leadership function does not overtake the governance function and that Senate remains a place of sober second thought, oversight, and asking of tough questions.

Leading and governing are two sides of the same coin. Embracing that elevates the discourse on—and practice of—shared governance. It also reclaims the soul of true campus collaboration.

Note

1. This is based on the definition of *collaboration* as found in the *Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus* (2004).

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