

SHARED GOVERNANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF POWER ON THE MODERN UNIVERSITY CAMPUS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ADMINISTRATOR

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On campuses throughout the United States the issue of shared governance is being hotly debated. The debate over the issue has driven several important questions to the forefront. These include: Just what is shared governance? Should crucial decision making be a joint effort including both faculty members and administrators? Are there certain areas on campus where faculty should be given sole responsibility for decision making? Should faculty and administration have equal power in making decisions that will affect the future of the institution?

This article explores these and other critical questions that surround this issue from the perspective of an administrator at a public state run institution of higher education.

In this exploration of the various philosophical and pragmatic aspects of the topic the author identifies the foundational research that leads to his beliefs.

Definition

“Shared governance refers to the shared responsibility between administration and faculty for primary decisions about the general means of advancing the general educational policy determined by the school’s charter.” (Flynn, 2005, p.1).

This definition of shared governance is an excellent starting point for the exploration of the controversial and growing issue of shared governance on today’s changing campuses. It does though raise some very important questions which need to be explored and ultimately decided upon if a truer understanding of the concept of shared governance is to be gained.

The faculty

While common sense and historical

precedence dictate that faculty members are a crucial and seemingly irreplaceable component for offering a quality education, the question arises as to whether or not all faculty members are to be given equal power in making the important decisions that can determine a university’s future.

Tenure versus Non-Tenured

Should only tenured faculty members be permitted to participate in any shared decision making? Although tenure faculty members have a strong understanding of the history and needs of the university, one could strongly argue that to restrict shared decision making to these individuals alone would produce a vision for the institution that is more strongly rooted in the past than the future. Since institutions of higher

learning are often in flux in an ever changing world this restriction could prove to be disastrous for any real progressive change on a campus. New faculty members, while lacking the strong institutional historical perspective of their tenured colleagues, very often provide valuable insights that are crucial to the vision and mission of the university. This is particular true of faculty members who have worked on other campuses. On the other hand, these faculty members though may not have forged as strong a commitment to the institution as those who have worked there for many years.

This dilemma can easily be carried forth to include full-time versus part-time faculty members. Should the opinions of part-time instructors be ignored or excluded based simply upon the number of courses they teach?

If one adds in other mitigating factors such as the number of faculty members, the size of the university, the question of seniority, the role of employee unions or bargaining agents, or a host of a thousand other factors that work to further subdivide the faculty, the dilemma grows. As a result, due to the complexities and intricacies of these many factors, no definitive prototype can be offered as a model for campuses to follow. Instead, like quicksand, there is no solid ground on which to base a definite answer to the overriding and consuming question of which faculty members should be allowed to participate in the decision making process and which should be excluded.

The only answer to providing some form of consistency is for faculty members and administrators on each campus to decide who will be allowed to actively participate in shared governance. Only they can best understand the subtle interplay of campus life that affords the institution the best possible prospect for achieving its academic goals. As a general rule then, until a specific tried and true model can be developed, one is hard pressed to claim that campus faculty should be given an equal voice in the decision making process of the institution, or more specifically be given *carte blanche* in any specific realm.

The administration

Closely related to which faculty members should be entrusted with decision making powers is the need to identify those professionals who comprise the administration. For example, are chairpersons by nature of their responsibilities administrators or simply faculty members performing administrative tasks? While this and similar questions can produce an unending and unclear debate, for the purposes of this article the author defines administrators as those individuals who hold senior level administrative posts from the Division Chairperson or Dean level upward.

Areas of control and decision making.

Are there particular areas where faculty should be given total control and ultimate decision making power? This is a crucial question that must be explored by delving more deeply into traditional areas of faculty control.

The curriculum

While it is understood that curriculum goals can often be determined by outside legal authorities on the state and national levels, on most campuses faculty members are entrusted to make important curriculum decisions. Many faculty members see curriculum development and revision as their exclusive domain. While it is understandable that faculty members are indeed the experts within their given discipline areas, it could also be strongly argued that not all curriculum decisions can be solely based on individual expertise within limited fields of study. For example, should science faculty members be entitled to make decisions on curriculum issues that would impact on the Art Department? If given control over the selection of core general study requirements or budgetary expenditures this is exactly what could occur. In addition, if faculty members within a discipline are granted total control to define their own academic curricula, how will the institution maintain any semblance of academic consistency or quality of educational instruction?

Tenure and Promotion

Faculty members on most campuses have historically wielded great power and exerted considerable influence regarding the issues of tenure and promotion.

While faculty input is both essential and valuable to the tenure and promotion process, this input must in the final analysis serve as only one benchmark for determining whether or not an individual receives tenure and the benefit of life long

employment, or promotion with its accompanying monetary gains and increased prestige. Usually, through the use of Tenure and Promotion Committees faculty members are charged with evaluating their peers to determine if these individuals have earned the right to either tenure or promotion. Many college and university systems even allow for some form of input from the faculty at large.

While this basic system has proven beneficial it does contain one major systemic flaw. During the review process faculty members are asked to sit in judgment over their colleagues, their peers, and their friends. This creates great pressure on committee members to approve applications. To not do so places the committee member in the unenviable position of having to work with these colleagues after having turned them down for either tenure or promotion. As a result, it is a significant reality that the vast majority of individuals applying for tenure or promotion receive positive reviews from Tenure and Promotion Committees.

In order to counteract this possible bias it is essential that the administration closely review the tenure or promotion application independently and arrive at a decision. In order for the process to work effectively it is important that both sets of recommendations carry equal weight; however, once both recommendations have been determined and formalized the final judgment must rest with the President of the University and the Governing Board.

The "Bigger Picture"

Since territoriality, pressure from colleagues, and internal politics are ugly realities on campuses today, it only makes good sense for the institution to strive for a larger "bigger picture" view of issues that can affect its future, particularly in the areas of curriculum development and staffing.

Who then is best suited to seeing the "bigger picture" and determining which programs and personnel are most vital for the continued academic and fiscal success of the institution? The answer appears to be the administrators. Due to the nature of their work, administrators are required to successfully complete a varied array of tasks in order to fulfill their job related objectives and obligations. While dealing with a wider set of issues each day on campus they come into contact with a greater number of individuals with different and more diverse perspectives. During these contacts administrators are able to gather more information, and as such are able to make informed decisions based upon the input of a wider group of interested individuals.

Therefore, while it is clear that because of their expertise it is vital for faculty members to be given the opportunity to provide valuable input into the decision making process in order to ensure quality of instruction, it is also equally as clear that in some limited cases it is as vital that faculty members defer to administrators or outside authorities who better understand the immediate and long range needs of the institution. When this does occur it should not be seen as a usurpation of power on the part of the administration, but only sim-

ply as a necessary means in order to achieve specific institutional goals.

The real question

Proponents on both sides of the shared governance question acknowledge that the ultimate authority on campus lies legally in the Governing Board of the institution who is charged with fulfilling the objectives of the Charter. The research clearly shows this to be the case. For example, two of the strongest faculty advocating groups, the American Association of University Professors (A.A.U.P.) and the American Council on Education (A.C.E.) in their joint 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities reinforced this belief and acknowledged that "the governing board of an institution of higher education in the United States operates, with few exceptions, as the final institutional authority (American Association of University Professors, 1966, p.4).

It is quite clear that when exercised properly shared governance is extremely beneficial for a university. While both faculty and administrators understand that shared governance must out of necessity be a viable and working condition on today's campuses, the real question is must this decision making process be equally shared by both faculty and administrators within all areas? If not, should faculty be allowed to have final control and decision making in certain areas of campus governance and administrators in others?

This question has played itself out in the courts and on hundreds of campuses across the country. Legislative initiatives,

such as California Assembly Bill 1725, which was enacted into law in September 1988, have been passed in attempts to establish procedures to better govern campuses. Colleges and universities such as Georgia Perimeter, Leeward Community, and Compton, to name but a few, have opened the lines of communication to help grappled with this question and have worked to develop strategies to deal with it. These as well as other institutions have attempted to develop committees or other bureaucratic frameworks to handle the daily implementation of shared governance in a fair and equitable manner.

While keeping the lines of communication open in order to allow all interested and informed parties an opportunity to provide input is essential, there comes a time when the ultimate responsibility for dealing with the complex issues facing any modern day institution of higher learning must be assigned and vested in some person or body.

The reality is that faculty members should be given an influential role in determining university policies. However, this input cannot be given at the expense of other important constituencies on campus. Staff members, lower level administrators, students, and all others who have a stake in the institution's future must be given a loud and strong voice as well.

No one group can claim dominance based upon expertise within a prescribed area alone. Upon closer analysis it is apparent that the many and varied individual groups that comprise a campus provide

individual, unique, and needed expertise to help guarantee that the institution will not only survive, but thrive. For example, those who develop long range visions for the expansion and growth of the physical, concrete and mortar aspects of the campus, are as vital as any faculty member or administrator at given times. No one group can claim exclusive or disproportionate overriding rights based upon expertise within a given domain. All important groups on campus are equally critical to the success of the institution.

So, the larger question is not which group is most essential to the well-being of the institution and therefore should be allowed final decision making power with the approval of the governing board? The question is which group must out of necessity make the every day daily decisions in a timely manner in order to allow an institution to keep its doors open and continue to educate its students?

For this author, it is not a matter of philosophy. As stated, all the individuals who make up the various groups on campus are vital to the institution's continued success and well-being. Instead, for this author, it is a matter of practicality. To keep the proverbial "trains running," administrators must be allowed to exercise ultimate daily decision making powers in order to implement policies in a timely manner. This is particularly true in certain well defined areas where administrators possess experience, technical expertise, and skills that are essential to the well-being of the institution. Again, even the American Association of University Professors

acknowledges this reality. The organization states "budgets, personnel limitation, the time element, and the policies of other groups, bodies, and agencies having jurisdiction over the institution may set limits to realization of faculty advice." (American Association of University Professors, 1966, p.4).

The major caveat here is apparent. Administrators cannot make decisions in a vacuum. In order to assist administrators in making informed decisions that will benefit the institution, it is essential that lines of communication be developed and actively utilized. Through these lines of communication crucial input from faculty members and all other campus-wide groups can be channeled.

In the final analysis, shared governance exercised within these parameters and guided by the principles of such practicality can successfully work to implement essential policies without compromising the integrity and quality of the educational experience.

References

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