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ARTICLE TOOLS

July 23, 2009

### Exactly What Is 'Shared Governance'?



Brian Taylor

By Gary A. Olson

At a recent conference of college administrators, several of us had an impromptu discussion over lunch about the meaning of "shared governance." The consensus? That term is often invoked but much misunderstood by both faculty members and many administrators.

"Some of my faculty believe that shared governance literally means that a committee votes on some new plan or proposal and that's

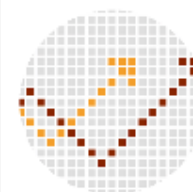
it—it gets implemented," said a seasoned department head. "There is no sense of sharing, of who is sharing what with whom."

A dean chimed in that a faculty leader at her institution actually told her that shared governance means that professors, who are the "heart of the university," delegate the governance of their universities to administrators, whose role is to provide a support network for the faculty. "He

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said, in all seriousness, that faculty have the primary role of governing the university and that administrators are appointed to spare them from the more distasteful managerial labor," said the dean with incredulity.

That may be a more commonly held notion in academe than it at first appears. I know several faculty senators at one institution who regularly refer to faculty as "governance," as in "You're administration, and we're governance." That expression reveals a deep misunderstanding of the mechanism of shared governance—and presupposes an inherently adversarial relationship.

The phrase shared governance is so hackneyed that it 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. Once a term arrives at that point, it is essentially useless.

Shared governance is not a simple matter of committee consensus, or the faculty's engaging administrators to take on the dirty work, or any number of other common misconceptions. Shared governance is much more complex; it 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.

The truth is that all legal authority in any university originates from one place and one place only: its governing board. Whether it is a private college created by a charter, or a public institution established by law or constitution, the legal right and obligation to exercise authority over an institution is vested in and flows from its board. Typically, the board then formally delegates authority over the day-to-day operation of the institution (often in an official "memorandum of delegation") to the president, who, in turn, may delegate authority over certain parts of university management to other university officials—for example, granting authority over academic personnel and programs to the provost as the chief academic officer, and so on.

Over time, the system of shared governance has evolved to include more and more representation in the decision-making process. The concept really came of age in the 1960s, when colleges began to liberalize many of their processes. In fact, an often-cited document on the subject, "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," was issued jointly by the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges in the mid-60s. That statement attempted to affirm the importance of shared governance and state some common principles.

The fact that the primary organization championing faculty concerns, the body devoted to preparing future academic administrators, and the association promoting best practices in

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... serving on governing boards together endorsed the statement illustrates that university governance is a collaborative venture.

"Shared" governance has come to connote two complementary and sometimes overlapping concepts: giving various groups of people a share in key decision-making processes, often through elected representation; and allowing certain groups to exercise primary responsibility for specific areas of decision making.

To illustrate the first notion of how shared governance works, I'd like to revisit a 2007 column, "[But She Was Our Top Choice](#)," in which I discussed the search process for academic administrators and attempted to explain why hiring committees are commonly asked to forward an unranked list of "acceptable" candidates. I wrote that shared governance, especially in the context of a search for a senior administrator, means that professors, staff members, and sometimes students have an opportunity to participate in the process—unlike the bad old days when a university official often would hire whomever he (and it was invariably a male) wanted, without consulting anyone.

"Shared" means that everyone has a role: The search committee evaluates applications, selects a shortlist of candidates, conducts preliminary interviews, contacts references, chooses a group of finalists to invite to campus, solicits input about the candidates from appropriate stakeholders, and determines which of the finalists are acceptable. Then it's up to the final decision maker, who is responsible for conducting background checks and entering into formal negotiations with the front-runner, and who is ultimately held responsible for the success (or failure) of the appointment.

"Shared" doesn't mean that every constituency gets to participate at every stage. Nor does it mean that any constituency exercises complete control over the process. A search cannot be a simple matter of a popular vote because someone must remain accountable for the final decision, and committees cannot be held accountable. Someone has to exercise due diligence and contact the front-runner's current and former supervisors to discover if there are any known skeletons that are likely to re-emerge. If I am the hiring authority and I appoint someone who embezzled money from a previous institution, I alone am responsible. No committee or group can be held responsible for such a lack of due diligence.

That's a good example of shared governance as it daily plays out in many areas of university decision making. No one person is arbitrarily making important decisions absent the advice of key constituents; nor is decision making simply a function of a group vote. The various stakeholders participate in well-defined parts of the process.

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The second common, but overlapping, concept of shared governance is that certain constituencies are given primary responsibility over decision making in certain areas. A student senate, for example, might be given primary (but not total) responsibility for devising policies relevant to student governance. The most obvious example is that faculty members traditionally exercise primary responsibility over the curriculum. Because professors are the experts in their disciplines, they are the best equipped to determine degree requirements and all the intricacies of a complex university curriculum. That is fitting and proper.

But even in this second sense of shared governance—in which faculty members exercise a great deal of latitude over the curriculum—a committee vote is not the final word. In most universities, even curricular changes must be approved by an accountable officer: a dean or the university provost, and sometimes even the president. In still other institutions, the final approval rests with the board itself, as it does for many curricular decisions in my own university and state.

Clearly, when it comes to university governance, "shared" is a much more capacious concept than most people suspect. True shared governance attempts to balance maximum participation in decision making with clear accountability. That is a difficult balance to maintain, which may explain why the concept has become so fraught. Genuine shared governance gives voice (but not necessarily ultimate authority) to concerns common to all constituencies as well as to issues unique to specific groups.

The key to genuine shared governance is broad and unending communication. When various groups of people are kept in the loop and understand what developments are occurring within the university, and when they are invited to participate as true partners, the institution prospers. That, after all, is our common goal.

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## Comments

Olsen's take on academic governance is interesting though very limited in its scope. Not all universities are governed the same way, because they come out of very specific historical traditions. In the US most of the early colleges grew out of finishing schools for young gentlemen. On the other hand British school came out of a tradition of colleges that is communities of scholars, the students of which for much of their early history often did not bother finishing degrees, which were for the most part the province of the religious. On the continent there were several other more or less centralized universities, often run by the church in a very hierarchical way.

Commonwealth universities and in fact many American universities hearken back to the collegial system of governance developed in the older British universities. Because of this legacy many anglophone universities have specifically bicameral systems where an elected senate and an appointed board have to approve all matters of great importance. I have sat on such a senate, where we were required to approve the budget, while the board was required to approve major curricular changes, though neither could arise in the other body. In our case the board of trustees consisted of senators, administrators, local member of the community and alumni --- this is important to connect the university with the wider world. However the senate was elected solely by the faculty --- thus any major policy had to be approved by a board elected from the faculty.

What needs to be noticed in such a system is that the administrative officers are the servants of collegial governance, not the implementors of it. The executive functions of such universities are subordinate to the legislative functions.

Presidents, rectors, vice-chancellors, provosts and other administrative officers have tried to professionalize the running of the university. However collegial governance is the bulwark against the small minded tyranny of a lay board, of the local business interests and narrow minded small town boosters, who, when boards are given too much control, and have too little faculty representation, can turn research institutions into technical schools, over grown community colleges with football programmes.

Administrators need to realize that the only way to safe guard the research and scholarly missions of universities is to accept their role of servant of collegial governance, and furthermore support and encourage faculty in exercising their duties in this regard.

Shared governance is often code for the president and a pet board running roughshod over the faculty's interests. This is why faculty tell you rightly that they are governance and you are administration.

Allowing administrative officers too much power to create policy is dangerous because it upsets the balance. There is a danger of presidents trying to use the board of governors as a power base, giving them power over the faculty, it is all well and good when they are under the president's thumb. but when they realize they have power to overrule the

senate, the academic freedom of the institution, not to mention the professoriate is likely to come under attack.

2. demery1 - January 08, 2010 at 09:42 am

I wish every administrator were Gary Olsen.

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