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How to Make Shared Governance Work: Some Best Practices

By Steven C. Bahls // Volume 22, Number 2 // March/April 2014



The commitment to shared governance is too often a mile wide and an inch deep. Board members, faculty leaders, and presidents extol the value of shared governance, but it frequently means something different to each of them. When that is the case, at the first bump in the road, participants can become frustrated, sometimes walking away from a commitment to do the hard work of good governance. Worse yet, when that happens, there may be mutual recriminations that can cripple the institution for years. Much has been written on the benefits of shared governance, but less has been written on practical steps to take to make shared governance work.

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Effective and responsive governance is vitally important during times of change in higher education. Sharing governance in the face of sweeping and transformative change can help shift the thinking of boards, faculty, and staff from protecting yesterday's parochial interests to aligning efforts to address tomorrow's realities. When efforts are aligned, solutions are often more thoughtful and implementation time is faster.

The trends pressuring many colleges and universities are numerous, and they demand unprecedented cooperation and collaboration among boards, administrators, and presidents. They include:

- Heightened competition from institutions delivering online and non-traditional types of higher education that require faculty and boards to develop timely, unified, and mission-sensitive responses;
- The drumbeat of calls for stronger student outcomes, including better graduation rates and placement rates, which requires building consensus among the board, administration, and faculty; and
- Affordability and accessibility issues that require all within the institution to better focus on doing their part to create the best value for an increasingly diverse set of students.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges has called for “integral leadership” from leaders of colleges and universities. Recently, in a publication called *Top 10 Strategic Issues for Boards, 2013–2014*, AGB provided this compelling definition of integral leadership:

“To accomplish these goals, many governing boards have moved to a model of integral leadership—**collaborative but decisive leadership** that can energize the vital partnership between boards and presidents.

Integral leadership links the president, faculty, and board in a well-functioning partnership purposefully devoted to a **well-defined, broadly affirmed institutional vision.**"

The bolded phrases in this definition are areas enhanced and strengthened through strong systems of sharing governance. Effective shared governance increases collaboration, creates useful links between constituencies, and builds needed partnerships.

But it can do so much more. When shared governance is viewed as more than a set of boundaries and rules of engagement, it can create a system where the integral leaders move beyond the fragmentation of traditional governance. They move to shared responsibility for identifying and pursuing an aligned set of sustainable strategic directions. And though it may take time to develop these priorities, once they're identified, each constituency can be more decisive in implementing tactics to advance them.

There are five best practices that cut across various types of institutions, whether public or private, unionized or non-unionized, four-year colleges or community colleges, traditional or specialized. Although these types of institutions are different in many ways, including how boards and faculties are structured, they still have much in common. Each board has similar fiduciary and supervisory duties, and each faculty has substantial responsibility for the curriculum. And every institution sometimes experiences a degree of tension between faculty members and board members.

The five practices below, when deliberately followed, create the alignment in which administrators, board members, and faculty members become integral leaders.

1. Actively engage board members, administrators, and faculty leaders in a serious discussion of what shared governance is (and

isn't).

Faculty members and trustees tend to disagree on how to define shared governance and what to expect from it. Faculty members often view it as equal rights to governance. That is the most literal view of the word “shared” in shared governance—as in “share and share alike.” While this view might be attractive in theory, it is problematic in practice. Faculty members do not have veto power over decisions that are within the primary fiduciary and oversight responsibilities of the board. Similarly, although boards are ultimately, as fiduciaries, responsible for the academic quality of their institutions, trustees should only rarely exercise any power they have to veto core academic decisions.

Likewise, board members and administrators sometimes view shared governance as the obligation to consult with faculty before decisions are made, particularly those directly influencing the academic program. But faculty members often expect more than mere consultation prior to implementation of a decision. They expect to be at the table at key junctures in the decision-making process, instead of appearing for a pro forma consultation after the decision is made. Faculty members tend to view accountability differently than do board members, seeing it as steadfast adherence to a collegial process with wide participation, while board members tend to value process less and judge accountability by strong outcomes. Boards lose credibility with the faculty if they shortcut agreed-upon processes.

Board leaders, faculty leaders, and presidents should openly discuss how they view shared governance. How does each constituency define shared governance and how significant are the differences?

The first step to having a meaningful discussion of expectations is for the president, faculty leaders, and board leaders to state publicly their support for shared governance. At the same time, leaders should make it clear that shared governance is not a sword for gaining the upper hand in policy debates. Rather, it's a system for building communication, respect, and trust—with an eye toward developing integral leaders at all levels.

For institutions that enjoy effective shared governance, faculty

leaders and board leaders should seek agreement on each of these five fundamental propositions:

- Shared governance is a central value of integral leadership that requires continued hard work, open communication, trust, and respect.
- The faculty has the central role in setting academic policy, and the board should hold faculty leaders responsible for ensuring academic quality.
- While board members have fiduciary responsibility for many of the business and financial decisions of the college, they should consider the views of the faculty before making important decisions.
- In cases of disagreement between faculty and board members about decisions where both have responsibilities (e.g., tenure and retrenchment), faculty handbooks and other governing documents should clearly state how disagreements are addressed and by whom.
- The most important aspect of shared governance is developing systems of open communication where faculty members, board members, and administrators work to align and implement strategic priorities.

Though all constituencies may not agree on the details, it is hard to disagree with the spirit of these five propositions and underlying principles. Once constituencies are in general agreement on these propositions, the way is paved to develop a commonly understood view of shared governance and a culture of shared mutual responsibility for the welfare of the institution.

2. Periodically assess the state of shared governance and develop an action plan to improve it.

Shared governance at most institutions is far from perfect, because it is difficult, messy, and imprecise work. The first step to improvement is to develop an accurate assessment of the state of shared governance at the institution. That can be done in different ways. Some institutions may want to develop formal surveys. Others may want more informal discussions through an appointed task force or discussions at board meetings and retreats.

The following questions get to the heart of the “health” of shared governance:

- What does each constituency expect from effective shared governance? What are the benchmarks of good governance? How do these definitions and expectations differ?
- Do faculty members believe that the board and administration are transparent about important college matters? Do board members believe the administration and the faculty are transparent in sharing information about student learning outcomes, how the outcomes are assessed, and how the curriculum supports student achievement?
- Do the faculty and board believe they receive sufficient information from the administration to participate in making good decisions? Is the information presented in an easily understandable form?
- Do faculty members believe that the structure of faculty governance will facilitate shared governance?
- Does the board believe that its own structure encourages sharing governance with faculty?
- Do faculty members understand how board decisions are made and vice versa?
- Is it clear who makes what decisions, who is to be consulted, and who must approve?
- How well are faculty members informed about how the board works and vice versa?
- Is there shared agreement on the strategic priorities of the college?
- In an open-ended question, what suggestions do those who complete the survey have for improving shared governance?

Board members and administrators must be thick-skinned when asking for a candid assessment from faculty members. When members of the faculty, administrators, and board members discuss these questions, each usually progresses toward a more mutual expectation of shared governance. In the process, each gains the trust of the other, strengthening the social capital that will move the institution ahead in difficult times.

As a way of drawing these discussions to a conclusion, the president should consider appointing an ad hoc task force or working group to

create strategies for improving shared governance by building trust, open communication, and ways to resolve differences amicably.

3. Expressly support strong faculty governance of the academic program.

If a faculty can't effectively govern itself, it will be too fragmented, or even dysfunctional, to meaningfully and responsibly share in the governance of the institution. A faculty that is able to take strong, unified, and even bold collective action can help move from shared governance to shared responsibility.

Robert Zemsky, the founding director of the Institute for Research on Higher Education, recently put it this way: "I would start by having faculty relearn the importance of collective actions—to talk less about shared governance, which too often has become a rhetorical sword to wield against an aggrandizing administration, and to talk instead about sharing responsibility for the work to be done together."

While boards and administrations shouldn't, and really can't, establish structures that ensure the faculty functions well, they can take several simple steps to encourage effective faculty governance:

- Boards and presidents should reward strong faculty governance by stating the importance of the faculty making appropriate and timely decisions, and valuing those actions. Board chairs should do that at board and committee meetings when faculty members are in attendance, and presidents should make such acknowledgments at faculty meetings and at general "state of the college" addresses.
- Boards should give legitimacy to faculty leaders by inviting them to the table at crucial junctures in a decision-making process. That may include invitations to board committee meetings, full board meetings, and board retreats.
- Board leaders, the president, and the chief academic officer should meet annually with faculty leaders, aside from normal board meetings and faculty meeting times. Doing so allows for a full and open exchange of ideas.
- Presidents should include faculty leaders in leadership programs, particularly in internal programs that the institution

maintains for administrators. Many faculty members have no leadership training and little experience. Supporting faculty leadership development also may have the benefit of grooming the next dean, provost, or even president.

- Board members should avoid circumventing faculty leaders by giving undue attention to those who express individual concerns not widely held by other members of the faculty. When seeking to understand the sense of the faculty, trustees should rely on elected faculty leadership, not that one professor who seeks to get around the faculty governance process by filing a special brief with the board.

Strong faculty leadership, combined with an effective board and integral presidential leadership, leads to a nimble system of shared governance that addresses challenges and seizes opportunities in a timely way.

4. Maintain a steadfast commitment to three-way transparency and frequent communication.

Effective shared governance depends on three-way transparency. The faculty can't adequately participate in governance if they do not have the information from which to develop informed positions. Board members can't appropriately exercise their general oversight of the institution's academic program if the faculty withholds important facts about the value of the program. And presidents who withhold information from either of the other constituencies as a way of consolidating their power or dividing and conquering are not integral leaders.

Best practices for sharing information with the faculty include:

- Prepare and distribute a simple one-page chart describing who makes which decisions. The chart should describe different decisions across the vertical axis and decision makers (e.g., faculty senate, the president, the board, the executive committee) across the horizontal axis. Within each of the boxes, the role of the respective decision makers is listed (e.g., consultation, recommendation, making initial decisions, approving of decision, acting as appellate body). The chart should pay special attention to the budget process and faculty

tenure and promotion.

- Share board and committee agendas with the faculty and other members of the community before board meetings. Include a summary of actions taken by the board shortly after the meeting.
- Clearly communicate decisions being considered by the board and the president's executive cabinet, why those decisions are before the board or the president's cabinet, the timetable for the decision, and the extent of the faculty's opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Give faculty leaders an opportunity to discuss their views.
- Conduct periodic faculty forums with key decision makers presenting. The board chair could present on how the board makes decisions. The chief financial officer could present on how budgets are developed.
- Encourage faculty leaders to observe board meetings and committee meetings, where appropriate.

5. Develop deliberate ways to increase social capital between board members and members of the faculty.

As board members, faculty members, and administrators work together, they will naturally develop social capital. But social capital also can be developed and deepened outside of the formal shared-governance process. Consider these possible practices:

- With faculty members' permission (and not regularly), consider inviting board members to a faculty meeting, followed by a reception. Board members usually are impressed with the quality of deliberation at these meetings, just as faculty members usually are impressed with the quality of deliberation at board meetings.
- If the institution has a required first-year book to read, consider providing the book to the board with an opportunity before or after the board meeting to discuss the book with members of the faculty.
- Seat board members and faculty members in the same area at athletic events, concerts, and other special occasions, and at board meetings and dinners where both are present.
- Publish trustee and faculty leadership biographies. Let faculty members know that board members may be available as guest

lecturers in classes that touch on their areas of expertise.

- Invite a board member to participate in part of a study-abroad program or field trip for students.
- Invite board members to celebrations of student and faculty scholarship.
- Hold a reception during each board meeting on campus to give the community the chance to get to know the board, and vice versa.

Following such practices can help institutions build the trust and respect needed to sustain shared governance through good and bad times. In doing so, the institution moves from the traditional approach of shared governance to the more dynamic approach of shared responsibility.

Faculty And Shared Governance

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