Teaching, Research and Shared Governance?

Jeffrey L. Funderburk

There are many challenges to ‘shared governance’ at institutions of higher learning, including the fact that there is no consensus as to exactly what constitutes effective and appropriate shared governance. The document cited most often in regards to shared governance is the 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities, jointly formulated by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB).[i] The document lays out a set of broad principles, without giving specific instructions as to how to implement them.

Two recent articles from the Chronicle of Higher Education illustrate the diversity of opinion on the state of affairs with regards to shared governance. In his 2009 article entitled, "Exactly What Is ‘Shared Governance’?" Gary Olson, then provost at Idaho State University, offers a view of shared governance where input from all groups is balanced. He makes the statement that “[s]hared 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.[ii] In contrast is a 2011 article by faculty member John Lachs entitled, Shared Governance Is A Myth. Lachs goes so far as to state, “….that faculty influence on the operation of the university is an illusion, and that shared governance is a myth.[iii]

Ultimately, shared governance is not guaranteed, but it is generally considered to be a goal worth striving to achieve. Within our own faculty ranks, there are greatly divergent opinions regarding the importance of shared governance. Some choose not to be engaged in the decision making processes, while others hold that shared governance is good and necessary for the vitality of the institution.

The unwillingness on the part of some faculty members to take up the burden of service in this form is often cited as one significant impediment to effective shared governance. It is relatively easy to get faculty to agree on critiques of actions or decisions taken at the university, but it is often much more challenging to staff an open position on a key committee with faculty talent. Frequently, a small group of faculty members seem to dominate key university committees. This is not generally due to efforts of individual faculty to take control of everything, but rather, is the result of a limited pool of willing faculty members.

Within the administration there is a perception that faculty are unwilling to make themselves available for such service and only wish to be left alone to do their teaching and research. Such a perception may embolden some administrators to take unilateral action or at the very least be less inclined to make efforts to consult faculty in the future. There are plenty of examples that can be described as administrative overreach in actions taken and decisions made with limited consultation. However, faculty reticence to
take part in committee work can hardly be blamed for the extensive number of such instances.

Faculty reluctance to take part is understandable. The teaching and research requirements placed on individual faculty members have greatly increased over the years. It is often stated that service is not rewarded at the university, and in most cases, this appears to be true when it comes to promotion, tenure and pay.

The challenges to shared governance are complex. Shared governance is often a drawn out and painful process. It is never very easy. Allowing opposing views to be presented is time consuming and sometimes uncomfortable. There are many new players involved including greater influence from state legislatures, student services, athletics, community leaders and the like, each pushing an agenda that at times may be in conflict with what the faculty feels to be in the best interest of the institution. In the end, the inclusion of these new ‘stakeholders’ has complicated the process of shared governance. At the same time, the idea of consulting with all affected groups is at the core of the idea of shared governance and is essential.

From a faculty perspective, if we are going to achieve any type of effective shared governance that actively and consistently engages in consultation and collaboration, we must find a way to have broad and sustained faculty participation. To assume that all or a majority of the faculty agree on an issue is folly. Without broad participation in the discussion of topics, it is often not possible to accurately gauge whether there is a consensus of opinion within the faculty. Faculty must recognize that they are each an active participant in the process. By declining committee memberships, neglecting to respond to questionnaires and surveys, or not engaging with services within the university, they allow administrators and/or faculty to take action on their behalf with an incorrect assumption of consensus.

Given that effective shared governance requires a significant service commitment on the part of faculty, it is good to know that there are some benefits. Participants in shared governance tend to develop a richer understanding of the university and the role that their particular discipline and specialty plays within the broader framework. Many find that the experience reinvigorates their teaching and research, and occasionally enriches their sense of accomplishment and worth. Participation by diverse groups across the campus engenders greater understanding of the differences and interrelationships that exist within the institution and can lead to enhanced faculty cooperation on a variety of fronts, thus leading to an enhanced intellectual climate on the campus.

If implemented in an open and transparent manner shared governance can be a valuable asset for the university. It is an ideal worthy of the efforts of scholars. If we value the institution, it should be part of our commitment to make every effort to preserve and improve it for the benefit of generations to come. Shared governance offers the most effective mechanism for having such an influence.

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