STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE FACULTY GOVERNANCE

AT LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES[1]

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One of the most distinctive and enduring qualities of liberal arts colleges and universities is a commitment to faculty or shared governance. Faculty governance plays a central role in many if not most liberal arts colleges and universities, and faculty members and administrative colleagues at these schools hold fast to the idea that they should have some significant say in nearly all aspects of their institution's administration. Because of their small size and focused mission of liberal arts colleges and universities, faculty governance is not only feasible, but it can also focus efforts on the school's mission, contribute to its effective day-to-day operations, and enhance a sense of cooperation and shared commitment. Yet, faculty governance either does not work well or is often less effective than it can be. Challenges – both external such as the recent economic crisis and internal such as difficult academic and policy decisions – can be especially taxing on governance mechanisms and processes, so strengthening faculty governance and making shared governance processes more functional and resilient can only enhance institutional effectiveness at any time, and especially during critical periods in the life of a college or university.

From the vantage point of service as a department chair and as a member of many of my college's committees, including a three-year term on its Faculty Executive Committee and service as chair of that group, I've formulated a set of ideas about what is required for effective faculty governance at liberal arts colleges and universities. I'm sure what follows represents neither a comprehensive set of requirements for successful faculty governance nor do I propose that this set of ideas guarantees effective faculty governance. I do believe, however, these ideas will offer a useful roadmap for faculty members and administrators who are committed to building and maintaining an effective system of shared governance at their institution.

The Faculty Agenda Must Be Congruent with the Overall College or University Agenda

The goals of an institution's faculty will overlap with the overall college or university agenda to a greater or lesser extent. Complete consistency between these two sets of goals is unlikely because the faculty agenda will necessarily be more focused on students and the academic program and policies, while the overall college or university agenda must also include important budgetary and fundraising objectives. But if faculty members and other constituencies are to avoid working at cross purposes, it is

essential that the faculty and college agendas share a common understanding of the institution's overall mission and future.

Such a common understanding promotes a sense that "we are all in this together," and that faculty, administrators, board members, and other college or university constituencies are working together to achieve common objectives. Faculty members, administrators, and board members will find that their efforts are mutually supported and that they can join together to celebrate their work and accomplishments. Schools that have this kind of alignment and a sense of common purpose can be especially meaningful and exciting places for all employees to carry out their work.

If the faculty agenda is incongruent or inconsistent with the overall college agenda, antagonism between faculty and administrators will be inevitable and institutional effectiveness will suffer. And, it is difficult to imagine that this type of situation will allow the president and other officers to be fully supportive of faculty initiatives and priorities. If a college or university and its faculty are operating with inconsistent agendas, then challenges like the recent economic crisis can split an institution apart and make cooperation difficult. Misunderstandings will be unavoidable, and it is almost certain that faculty and administrators will find themselves working against, rather than with and for, each other.

Should college or university leaders find inconsistencies between the institution's agenda and faculty goals, then widespread consultation and discussion are needed to find common ground and to modify the goals of either the faculty or the college in order to gain greater alignment. For example, compensation policies are often an important faculty priority, but financial challenges have prevented many small colleges and universities from being able to focus on increasing faculty salaries and benefits. Candid conversation leading to mutual agreement about the ranking and timing of priorities can go a long way toward insuring that faculty and administrators are working together rather than at cross purposes. And, such open communication and candid conversation is valuable at any time, not just when disagreements over agendas and priorities arise.

A Focused Agenda

Not only is it important for the faculty and college agendas to be congruent, but the faculty must have a focused agenda. The goals, issues, and topics of interest to a college faculty will always exceed its ability to pursue them since few if any faculty members can give top priority to governance activities. In addition, most faculty committees will have a heavy load of "routine" responsibilities including making personnel decisions and evaluating curriculum proposals. Management scholars March and Simon long ago emphasized that routine activities tend to drown-out efforts to focus on what is really strategic to organizations.[2] Moreover, many unforeseen but important issues will arise throughout the year demanding attention. As a result, faculty committees must be deliberate about evaluating their priorities and developing a focused and doable agenda. My experience suggests that it is far better to have made good headway on accomplishing one, two, or three goals than to make little or no progress on a list of five or ten goals. Accomplishing goals provides energy and motivation for tackling more ambitious goals, while leaving a long agenda of goals unaccomplished can be demoralizing for everyone.

A focused agenda of only two or three objectives probably cannot reflect a consensus among all faculty members that these are the most important objectives for key committees to pursue. But, it is highly unlikely that such a degree of consensus is possible, even at the smallest colleges. On the other

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[2]Referred to as "Gresham's Law of Planning," cited in Mintzberg, H. 1994. *The rise and fall of strategic planning*. New York: Free Press.

hand, faculty leaders must be certain that their committees' agendas will enjoy widespread buy-in from a large cross-section of their faculty colleagues.

One of my mentors once showed me that the word "decide" has the same root as "scissors" – *caedere*, or "to cut." One implication of this is that when a key college committee chooses to focus on a limited set of objectives, it is also necessarily agreeing not to focus on all others. While this will inevitably disappoint colleagues who have a vested interest in issues that are being set aside at least temporarily, finite and focused agendas are absolutely essential if faculty committees are to make significant progress.

Avoiding Distractions

When taking-up a focused agenda, faculty leaders must be tenaciously devoted to it. Committees distracted by trying to deal with many or all of the issues that will arise throughout the year will accomplish far less than if they stay focused on their agenda. So, going hand-in-hand with the importance of a focused agenda is the need to avoid distractions. From service on my college's Faculty Executive Committee, I have seen how easily that group can become side-tracked by issues that arise throughout the year. Nearly all faculty committees will face this challenge, but to accomplish their goals, committees must let many of these issues go unaddressed. Rather than completely ignore the unanticipated issues that do crop-up throughout the year, faculty leaders can work with the dean or through other formal and informal channels to address these issues while also minimizing the demands these issues place on their committees' limited time. In some situations, dealing with an unexpected issue that arises during the year can be as easy as referring it to the appropriate individual or committee.

In some cases, an issue will arise that is important enough that it will have to be carefully considered by a key faculty committee. In these situations, talented committee chairs can strategize about ways to deal with the issue as expeditiously as possible, as they can endeavor to keep their committee's discussions and deliberations focused on its agenda.

Cooperation and Support from the Academic Dean and President

The academic dean and president must be totally committed to faculty governance if it is to be effective. Colleges and universities will benefit enormously if their dean and president are not only supportive of faculty governance processes, but if they actively welcome and encourage faculty governance efforts. There can be no denying that faculty governance is a messy, time consuming, demanding, and sometimes frustrating process, but deans and presidents who are willing to get involved in this messiness and commit themselves wholeheartedly to working with faculty leaders to shape an agenda and see it through to accomplishment will reap enormous rewards and benefits.

A number of colleges and universities have, over the last several years, gone outside academia to hire their presidents. Some of these outsiders can quickly come to understand and adapt to the unique challenges associated with working through faculty governance processes. On the other hand, some outsider presidents who are more accustomed to other management and leadership contexts may, unfortunately, never get it. But one important and telling measure of institutional effectiveness for liberal arts colleges and universities is how well their top administrators understand, respect, and are willing to work with and support faculty governance processes.

Early in most college presidencies, a planning process will take place, which usually has a key role in shaping the college agenda for the next five to ten years. It is especially important that faculty

members have broad participation in this process and that there is agreement from faculty leaders on the key agenda items that emerge from these planning processes. This is one of the main ways a president can insure that there is good alignment between the faculty agenda and the overall college agenda.

Similarly, the academic dean must be prepared to work collaboratively with faculty committees. The dean and faculty leaders should agree each year on long-term objectives, as well as specific agendas for the coming academic year. This agreement is important because, at many colleges, the dean will be the sole academic voice on the senior staff, and the dean will need to be able to share faculty sentiment and viewpoints with the other members of that administrative group. Moreover, the support and cooperation from the dean on key faculty initiatives will be essential since the dean will often be in the best position to allocate the resources required for the implementation of these initiatives. The dean must not use faculty committees as a scapegoat for difficult or unpopular decisions as this can damage and even destroy trust between the academic dean and faculty leaders. While it is unlikely that the dean and faculty leaders will always agree on every decision, they must establish and maintain a solid, positive, open, and trusting relationship.

Attendance and participation in campus colloquia, lectures, and performances by the president, dean, and other campus administrators are simple but highly symbolic ways to show support for faculty efforts. Attendance at these events not only demonstrates administrative support for specific programs and events, but for faculty initiatives in general.

Building Agreement among Faculty Colleagues

Ideally, faculty leaders on key college committees would so well represent their colleagues' interests that their recommendations would meet with little opposition from the entire faculty. This is, however, rarely the case. Part of this divergence can be traced to the inherent skepticism of faculty members. Nearly every faculty member also wants to be consulted or at least have the opportunity to provide input on significant issues. Thus, faculty committees will usually need to work hard to obtain agreement among their faculty colleagues in order to secure approval for their recommendations. Building this agreement among faculty members requires a number of steps:

Gathering and sharing evidence. As noted, faculty members share an inherent skepticism and this will manifest itself in a variety of ways. Some faculty members will question whether a particular problem exists. Even if faculty members agree a problem exists, they will rarely agree on the same approach to addressing that problem. Taking the time to marshal and disseminate a large body of evidence to demonstrate that a problem exists and to document its seriousness, and then also using that evidence to develop support for a specific response to the problem can help to overcome this skepticism. Faculty leaders and committees must not underestimate the amount of time it can take to do the necessary research and to share their findings with their colleagues.

Being responsive to feedback. Faculty leaders must provide opportunities for their colleagues to offer feedback and constructive suggestions. Depending on the magnitude of the issue, this may require meetings with groups of faculty colleagues long before the issue is brought-up for a vote at a full faculty meeting. At these group meetings, faculty leaders must genuinely listen to understand faculty sentiments and to identify concerns and sources of opposition. The simple act of involving faculty colleagues in decision making processes and taking their involvement and input seriously can often satisfy faculty members' need to be engaged in the decision making process.

Being willing to compromise. Few issues facing liberal arts colleges and universities have only one right answer, so faculty leaders should be open to reasonable suggestions, amendments, and

alternative approaches when they bring proposals to their colleagues. And, one sure way to build opposition is to ignore feedback and constructive suggestions that are offered by faculty colleagues. Even if those colleagues are not entirely opposed to the proposal, they will resent being ignored or having their suggestions brushed-off. In my experience, input from faculty colleagues has usually improved the substance of initial proposals. Some colleagues, to be sure, will actively seek to derail proposals, yet most colleagues are well intentioned. Faculty leaders who are receptive to feedback and willing to compromise will often win-over their faculty colleagues.

Persistence. Major changes in policy almost always require enormous amounts of patience and persistence. Initial attempts to change policy often go down to defeat because faculty colleagues cannot readily be made to see how a different future will offer more benefits than the *status quo*. As a result, patience and persistence are required, and even excellent proposals may not be adopted for one, two, or even more years. Again, this is where steadfast adherence to a focused and limited agenda can serve key faculty committees well. Persistence, along with evidence and the willingness to listen and compromise, will often eventually persuade even the most skeptical and resistant colleagues.

Transparency and fairness. Finally, nothing can defeat the work of faculty committees as much as the perception that the process has not been transparent or that relevant information is being withheld. Some faculty governance processes, such as tenure and other personnel decisions cannot always be transparent, in which case it is even more important that they appear to be fair and even handed. Any efforts that are made to insure transparent and fair decision making processes will likely go far toward achieving faculty buy-in and agreement.

Cultivating and Developing Faculty Leadership

I've come to believe that faculty governance, without strong faculty leadership, is an oxymoron. When I talk with faculty colleagues about faculty governance, I often get the sense that many assume that effective faculty governance should just happen or that the faculty should naturally be making most of the important decisions on a college or university campus (especially at small liberal arts colleges and universities like my own). Yet, anyone who takes a candid look at a college or university faculty will see that faculty governance is unlikely to happen without great personal effort and leadership. The phrase "herding cats" is used so often that it's a cliché, but the phrase does capture much about the faculty governance challenge: Just about every faculty member will have a set of strong opinions about a variety of issues, and it's unlikely that we will have widespread agreement on the priorities that should be associated with those issues and it's even more unlikely that we will readily agree on what should be done about those issues. Moreover, aside from faculty members who hold administrative positions, few faculty colleagues view faculty governance or college service as their highest priority – teaching, scholarship, and professional responsibilities more likely take precedence.

Thus, faculty governance requires *faculty leadership* if it is to be effective. A committed group of faculty colleagues must make the effort to focus faculty attention and energy so that good works can be accomplished. Without effective leadership, faculty attention can be too widely scattered to be effectively focused. Unfortunately, leadership is all too often timid or lacking and, as a result, the voice of the faculty on key issues is either not articulated or so ineffectively articulated that it is not heard in a persuasive way.

An academic dean or provost carries a good deal of responsibility for cultivating and developing faculty leadership. The dean is in the ideal position to identify potential faculty leaders from across the institution. The dean will also be in a position to provide continuity across important college committees, which tend to see significant turnover in their membership after every two or three years. Thus, the dean

can help key faculty committees recruit effective new members, work to keep those committees focused on key objectives, and remind committees of the importance of these objectives as new faculty members arrive on those committees. Bringing all of the chairs of key faculty committees together twice a year might be an effective way for the dean or provost to emphasize the importance of committee goals, share the progress that committees are making, and enhance communication among faculty leaders.

Too often, colleges have no systematic approach to cultivating, training, and developing faculty leaders, or providing them with support and encouragement. Individual faculty members who do demonstrate promise as leaders in early committee assignments often receive little formal encouragement to try their hand in other, more responsible leadership roles. Since most colleges and universities pay little attention to the importance of developing the leadership talents of their faculty members, a lot of talent gets wasted and many key committees are less effective than they might otherwise be.

Beyond identifying and developing faculty leaders, colleges should also encourage faculty members to attend meetings of the major education professional societies. While faculty members are usually good about keeping abreast of developments in their own fields of study and teaching, many are largely unaware of broad trends in higher education. Insuring that a representative and rotating group of faculty members are attending the national meetings of higher education professional societies can stimulate new thinking on campuses, and make faculty members more receptive to the changes that will be demanded by the future educational landscape.

Obstacles to Effective Faculty Governance

Many obstacles threaten effective faculty governance. Here I will focus on just three that can be especially problematic. First, faculty governance is nobody's job and it is everybody's job. By this I mean that almost no faculty member's primary responsibility is faculty governance. We are teachers and scholars first, and those two jobs can be all-consuming and then some. Time and energy devoted to faculty governance activities must be in addition to or in place of the time we devote to our teaching and scholarly activities, not to mention our family and personal lives. Understandably, many faculty colleagues are reluctant to serve on key faculty committees or to participate in other time-consuming faculty governance activities. At the same time, faculty governance requires faculty colleagues who are willing to commit themselves wholeheartedly and unselfishly to the task. How to allocate our finite time among our teaching, scholarship, and service activities has long been, and will continue to be, a key tension for faculty members.

Fortunately, most of our small colleges and universities value the diversity of faculty talents, and recognize that some faculty members will naturally excel as teachers, some as scholars, and some as faculty leaders. Carefully considered salary and compensation policies and release time can recognize the diversity of faculty talents and compensate faculty leaders who make extraordinary service contributions to their institutions.

Second, nearly all new faculty members join us from Ph.D. programs in which the priorities are research first, teaching a distant second, and college service something to be avoided altogether if possible. As a result, liberal arts colleges and universities have an important task to socialize new faculty members into finding the right balance among their teaching, scholarship, and service activities. In some cases, we find new colleagues who are too eager to dive in and become overly committed to service activities too early in their career, so again mentoring and socialization are needed to help them not become so committed to the service aspects of their job that their teaching and scholarship suffer in those critical, pre-tenure years.

Finally, a majority of the people serving in college support functions, including student life, admissions, business and finance, and advancement and development, are professionals who have no experience as faculty members, so they often do not understand faculty governance, cannot understand why faculty members would care about their area of expertise, and even resent what they perceive as faculty meddling. So, again, socialization and acculturation are needed for new administrative and support staff members so they come to understand the central role of faculty governance at liberal arts colleges and universities and that they come to see that almost no aspect of the institution is beyond the interest of some or all faculty members.

In spite of these obstacles and other challenges, faculty governance can work very well, and since a significant degree of faculty governance is likely to continue to be a key characteristic of liberal arts colleges and universities, the suggestions offered in this essay – alignment between institutional and faculty goals, a focused agenda and avoiding distractions, support of faculty governance processes by the president and dean or provost, efforts to build agreement among faculty colleagues, and cultivation of faculty leadership talents – will all go far in enhancing shared governance processes and strengthening these remarkable institutions. Working together successfully, faculty and administrative leaders can make real progress toward achieving goals and advancing their institution's mission. Tangible success will set in motion a virtuous cycle in which accomplishments in one year lay the foundation and provide momentum for additional accomplishments in future years. All constituencies find this kind of environment both stimulating and rewarding.