

Faculty Governance Units and Their Leaders: A National Profile

By Michael T. Miller

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College administrators and graduate programs in educational leadership consistently invoke the ideal of "shared authority." To administrators—whose "handbooks" and "guidebooks" are often veiled memoirs—sharing authority usually means political bargaining between sources of campus-based power.¹ In graduate programs, sharing authority typically means administrator and faculty teamwork in areas ranging from student affairs to curriculum reform. But beneath these definitions lies a richer concept for organizing academic life, namely, shared *governance* with faculty.

Studies of faculty governance often invoke a supposed heritage that began in colonial colleges, where presidents called on faculty to make critical, difficult decisions about institutional priorities, planning, and resource allocation. Perhaps faculty were more regularly consulted on substantive issues at one time. But faculty members were never empowered to run their institution—at least since the Middle Ages.² Instead, the record shows continued, sometimes contentious, negotiations between administrators and faculty over responsibility for an institution's mission and management.

Scholars of political science, public administration, business, and communication extol the virtues of shared authority and a shared decision-making process. Joint responsibility, these scholars note, improves institutional morale, broadens the range of solutions to difficult decisions, and increases feelings of institutional ownership and concern. Shared decision-making also unifies the community by bringing diverse scholars together in a common cause.³

Conversely, notes the same literature, sharing authority and decision-making can slow the process to the pace of the academic calendar, requiring academic semesters or years to make decisions. By belaboring a point or issue, faculty members can restrict (trivialize) the discussion to the point at which it carries weight with only themselves. Former college administrators see shared authority and decision-making as a double-edged sword, though a necessity to accomplish any short- or long-term agendas.⁴

We know about the products of shared governance, since they are noted regularly in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and on

Internet web-sites. But what happens inside the "black box?" What do we know about the process itself and about participating individuals? A five-year, national study focused on the faculty role in sharing in the governance process. The study also explored faculty perceptions about governance and about "ideal" governance settings. Last, study staff interviewed faculty leaders in shared governance settings. The goals: to provoke conversation about shared governance and to suggest improvements to the process and its outcomes.

STATE OF SHARED GOVERNANCE

The 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities, published by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), focused on the responsibility and obligation of faculty to participate in institutional governance. For AAUP, shared governance included exploring options, determining institutional mission and vision, and the rewards, expectations, and workload of faculty. Several years later, AAUP's Committee T on Faculty Participation in College and University Government found that faculty believed that achieving desirable levels of shared governance was an attainable goal, but that most faculty participation consisted of consultation, a lower level than the empowerment advocated in the 1966 statement.⁵

A 1987 study of faculty involvement in shared governance activities at the University of Washington identified six types of involved individuals—"collegials," "activists," "acceptors," "hierarchicals," "copers," and the "disengaged."⁶ The investigators offered a model predicting involvement; key variables included concern for governance issues, age of participant, and confidence in the faculty governance role. The scholars posited a correlation between likelihood of involvement and the perceived value of the issue to a faculty member. Situational involvement, the investigators argued, was the most likely form of involvement. Participation occurred in outbursts, depending on the issue and on the creation of coalitions to attack or fight off particular agendas.

Research on institutional governance—intensive in the 1970s and surgent in the 1990s—advanced a core set of values,

including mutual respect between administrators and faculty, commonly defined issues, and equality in decision-making, responsibility, and accountability.⁷ Effective shared governance, most scholars noted, requires two-way communication and an ability for each "side" to relinquish decision-making to the other when necessary. But shared governance, goes the current standard thinking, may also placate faculty needs for involvement and consultation in decision-making, even when not resulting in specific actions.⁸

RESEARCH METHODS

Our study, constructed in 1991, used a Delphi survey approach that queried the barriers to faculty involvement in governance. We drafted the items identified by faculty governance unit leaders into a comprehensive survey for broad dissemination. Graduate students and faculty members received a pilot test after an expert panel revised the instrument. The instrument was accepted to have face validity, after changes to its wording based on comments made about the pilot application. A Cronbach alpha was conducted on responses; we accepted for reliability the overall computed alpha level of .839.

The 32-item instrument was first used experimentally in 1995 at six colleges and universities in Alabama, including three research and graduate-oriented universities, two comprehensive regional universities, and one private liberal arts college. The survey was distributed via campus mail to a random sample of 100 faculty members at each college. In spring, 1996 surveys were distributed to an additional 1,000 randomly sampled faculty at five comprehensive universities and five research and graduate-oriented universities. In 1997 and 1998, 1,500 surveys were distributed to faculty at five private liberal arts colleges and ten community colleges.

A study coordinator from each of the ten participating community and junior colleges, eight research universities, seven comprehensive universities, and six liberal arts colleges co-signed a letter that accompanied the survey. Data were not initially stratified for analysis in this portion of the reporting due to the exploratory nature of the study.

In 1998, 300 surveys were distributed to faculty governance unit leaders at research and comprehensive universities, and at liberal arts colleges. The leaders were selected by their institutions and identified through the Internet. Another 100 community college leaders were surveyed. We asked deans of academic affairs or provosts to forward the instruments to the leaders of their faculty governance units. The survey asked these 400 leaders to provide demographic data and to respond to questions about their role orientation, skills, and tasks.⁹

FINDINGS

About 67 percent (2,087) of the 3,100 surveyed faculty members responded. The high response rate, we surmised, resulted from the requests to participate from local faculty member-coordinators. By institutional type, 720 (72 percent) responses came from community colleges, 521 (65 percent) from research universities, 510 (73 percent) from comprehensive universities, and 336 (56 percent) from private liberal arts colleges.

Role in the Governance Process

Faculty respondents gave mean ratings of agreement in the 3-to-4 range (neutral-to-agree) to four of five possible roles for faculty governance units (Table 1). The item with the highest mean rating of faculty agreement: "governance units must convince administration that the faculty 'voice' is a valuable component in decision-making" (mean 4.01; SD .876). The least agreement: "faculty should become more involved in developing specific outcomes for budgetary expenditures" (mean 3.49; SD 1.03). The standard deviation of only one other item exceeded 1.0: "faculty should assist in clarifying roles of administrators so they know they are to administer policy, not impose their own" (mean 3.74; SD 1.01).

Ideal Governance

Faculty gave mean ratings of between 4 and 5 (agree to strongly agree) on four of five listed characteristics of an ideal faculty governance unit (Table 2). The characteristics with the highest scores: "the faculty senate is utilized as a conduit through which faculty participation is solicited" (mean 4.10; SD .762),

Table 1

Faculty Roles in Governance* (n=2,087)

Role	Mean	SD	n
Convince the administration that the faculty "voice" is a valuable component in decision-making	4.01	0.876	2,070
Faculty must insist on rights and responsibilities in appropriate governance roles	3.99	0.900	2,071
Faculty committees should work harder to cooperate with administration	3.87	0.825	2,069
Faculty should assist in clarifying roles of administrators so that they know they are to administer policy and not impose their own	3.74	1.01	2,080
Faculty should be more involved in developing specific outcomes for budgetary expenditures	3.49	1.03	2,073

*Reported on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale with 1=Strong Disagreement, progressively, to 5=Strong Agreement.

and "faculty are empowered to question policy decisions through a well-articulated process" (mean 4.09; SD .600). The least agreement: "neutral 'consultants' are utilized to mediate faculty-administration dealings" (mean 3.80; SD .823). Faculty wish to resolve issues directly with administration, trustees, or other faculty units.

Perceptions of Shared Governance

Study participants were asked to rate their agreement with 19 items relating to faculty involvement in governance (Table 3). These items were drawn from existing scholarship and through a Delphi survey of faculty governance leaders. Mean scores (again, a 1 to 5 scale) ranged from 3.26 to 4.27, with seven items rated above 4.00 ("agree" to "strongly agree"). The highest rated items: "our governance body adequately represents the faculty point of view" (mean 4.27); "governance body practices adhere to the guidelines set forth in its constitution and bylaws" (mean 4.17), and "it is difficult to get people to serve on governance body standing and/or ad hoc committees" (mean 4.07). Using a reverse scoring item, faculty scored in the neutral to agree range for "the issues considered by our governance body are not important" (mean 3.26).

Governance leaders

About 66 percent (265 of 400) of the faculty governance leaders responded to the survey on governance characteristics. By gender, males outnumbered females among the primary leaders of faculty governance units (54 percent vs. 46 percent). A substantial male-majority in community college faculty leadership accounts for the disparity. The academic ranks of these leaders varied by type of institution: mainly associate professors in research universities, full professors in comprehensive universities and liberal arts colleges, and "other" ranks, such as general instructors or non-classified ranks, in community colleges (Table 4). Most leaders came from the liberal arts (42 percent); 13 percent each came from communications and medical fields. Leaders at all types of institutions, save community colleges, reported having a task orientation toward their work. In community colleges, 61 percent of the leaders reported a process orientation.

DISCUSSION

Faculty governance has a historical foundation in the academy. But, except for a brief moment during the 1960s and 1970s, faculty members have not exercised their power.

Table 2

Characteristics of an Ideal Governance Process (N=2,087)

Characteristic	Mean	SD	n
The faculty senate is utilized as a conduit through which faculty participation is solicited	4.10	0.762	2,069
Faculty are empowered to question policy decisions through a well-articulated process	4.09	0.600	2,731
Faculty members are adequately rewarded for their participation in the governance process	4.00	0.832	2,731
Institutional procedures involve faculty governance early in the decision-making process	4.00	0.899	2,731
Neutral "consultants" are utilized to mediate faculty-administration dealings	3.80	0.823	2,054

Table 3**Perceptions of Faculty Involvement in Governance (n=2,087)**

Characteristic	Mean	SD	n
Our governance body adequately represents the faculty point of view	4.27	0.963	2,061
Governance body practices adhere to the guidelines set forth in its constitution and bylaws	4.10	0.896	2,060
It is difficult to get people to serve on governance body standing and/or ad hoc committees	4.07	0.799	2,070
Our governance body is not well represented on committees making decisions on policy, planning, and allocation of resources	4.01	0.828	2,071
Faculty members are not adequately rewarded for their participation in the governance process	4.00	0.830	2,060
The governance body operates efficiently	4.00	0.830	2,060
The governance body's operating budget is adequate	4.00	0.743	2,060
Communication is good between the governance body and academic administrators	3.87	0.851	2,059
Governance body members and academic administrators meet regularly	3.72	0.899	2,060
Governance body representatives and the Board of Trustees meet regularly	3.69	0.924	2,060
The governance body does not have sufficient information on which to base its decisions	3.55	0.999	2,060
Communication is good between the governance body and the Board of Trustees	3.54	1.000	2,060
The governance body is involved in important decisions about the way the institution is run	3.51	0.870	2,061
Academic administrators and governance body expectations regarding the governance body's role are the same	3.48	1.000	2,060
We have no difficulty getting a quorum at governance body meetings	3.41	0.716	1,980
The governance body attracts the most capable people as members	3.39	0.989	2,040
Management information is readily provided to the governance body concerning issues it considers	3.39	0.947	2,060
Our governance body leaders are not well prepared to assume their positions	3.38	1.010	2,061
The issues considered by our governance body are not important	3.26	1.000	2,060

Table 4**Demographic Profile of Faculty Governance Leaders (N=267)**

	Comprehensive College		Liberal Arts College		Community College		All Colleges	
	n=68	68%	n=128	64%	n=71	71%	n=267	67%
Gender								
Male	31	46%	42	33%	54	76%	144	54%
Female	37	54	86	67	17	24	123	46
Rank								
Assistant	7	10%	6	5%	13	18%	26	10%
Associate	28	41	38	29	12	17	78	29
Professor	25	36	78	61	13	18	116	43
Other	8	12	4	3	32	45	44	16
N/R	0	0	2	1	1	1	3	1
Discipline								
Liberal Arts	19	28%	52	40%	41	58%	112	42%
Business	0	0	14	11	3	4	17	6
Agriculture	0	0	0	0	7	10	7	3
Education	2	3	3	2	0	0	5	2
Engineering	5	7	7	5	1	1	13	5
Law	4	5	0	0	0	0	4	1
Medicine	6	10	28	22	0	0	34	13
Social Work	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Communications	13	19	18	14	5	7	36	13
Other	19	28	6	5	14	20	39	15
Orientation								
Task	39	57%	82	64%	28	39%	149	56%
Process	29	43	46	36	43	61	118	44

Faculty in individual states and campuses effected specific changes through senates and bargaining units, but usually lacked the visibility and strength to sustain their influence. The sustained demonstration of power is only one—and perhaps the rarest—form of faculty involvement in governance.

Anecdotal reports on senates frequently speak to reaction: responding to an issue, a

presidential directive, or a state legislative mandate. Shared governance, some anecdotes note, has a powerful, positive effect on training future leaders, educating faculty and staff about key issues, building inter-disciplinary teams, and promoting morale. The conversation is moving from cheering for by-gone glory days to addressing meaningful aspects of collaboration through governance.

The primary goal: establishing equity and value in the faculty voice in decision-making. Many faculty members perceive a lack of respect by administrators for faculty involvement. This perception may result from differing expectations: a culture of misunderstanding may emerge if administrators anticipate clean, quick decision-making behavior, and faculty exhibit cautious, non-rushed deliberation.

More than 100 respondents did not answer the statement: "we have no difficulty getting a quorum at governance body meetings" (Table 3, mean=3.41, n=1,980). Does this non-response rate suggest a lack of knowledge of governance unit activities or a lack of interest in the unit? A lack of knowledge appears unlikely, given the use of the Internet to report unit actions. A lack of interest is not consistent with the relatively strong agreement expressed for "our governance body adequately represents the faculty point of view" (mean 4.27) and for "the governance body practices adhere to the guidelines set forth in its constitution and bylaws" (mean 4.17). A more likely explanation: most faculty members know of the existence and workings of the faculty senate or council, and may retain a general interest, but express indifference to specifics. This explanation is consistent with the hypothesis that shared governance is largely situational, with responses driven largely by the perceived value of an issue.¹⁰

The identified "ideal" characteristics reflect a belief that faculty involvement should be a rational, structured component of decision-making. Among ideal characteristics, faculty most often concurred with "the faculty senate is utilized as a conduit through which faculty participation is solicited."¹¹ Presidents and vice presidents often call committees and task forces without consulting a faculty governance unit. Respondents called for preventing unstructured solicitations of faculty labor by reforming the methods for establishing committees. The proposed remedy: having the faculty governance unit serve as an ongoing committee on committees. Faculty respondents also agreed that the governance unit should be involved early in the decision-making process, be entitled to question policy through a specific process that is known to all, and receive an adequate (though not necessarily financial) reward for their involvement.

Community college governance leaders had several distinctive characteristics—especially a strong process orientation among a male majority. The gender identification may be an indicator of changing times, since women faculty are moving rapidly into community colleges. But the process orientation suggests different faculty and institutional perspectives on governance. A task orientation more typical of leaders in four-year colleges suggests the unit embraces issues or activities and works with them to a compromised resolution. A process orientation suggests the unit leader is more of a fulcrum—facilitating group activities.

Here are the basic findings of this study: Faculty need to see a rational structure for involvement; faculty need to be cultivated, and faculty need to feel rewarded and valued for their involvement. *Volitional* involvement depends on the issue and its importance, and is triangulated with *permitted* involvement.

What then, is the role played by faculty attitudes? Positive attitudes come before positive actions. Given a rational structure, cultivation, and rewards, faculty can take responsibility and collective action, leading to empowerment. These results may dishearten constructivist campus leaders who advocate involvement to build teams and positive feelings about the institution.

What is the relationship of shared governance to the state of collective bargaining units and union behavior? Do senate and union leaders identify with each other? Faculty senates and governance units typically address issues that reflect institutional managerial and philosophical concerns, while unions take on worklife issues. Unions and senates will claim a stronger, more active and responsible voice in institutional governance by cross-fertilizing these conversations and merging their bases of influence.

Our findings may help to reinvigorate the conversation about crossing faculty involvement in governance with institutional management. In any case, shared governance persists while business practices invade and retreat from campus. Campus leaders, leaders in training, and scholars must find ways of building a community that allows for dissenting voices.

NOTES

¹ Kolodny, 1998, Kennedy, 1997, and Rosovsky, 1988.

² Baldrige, 1982.

³ Evans, 1999.

⁴ Birnbaum, 1991.

⁵ AAUP, 1971.

⁶ Williams, Gore, Broches, and Lostoski, 1987.

⁷ Gilmour, 1991 reported on a national study about the role and intention of faculty governance.

Gilmour cited the foundational literature of higher education, such as Kerr, 1991, and Mortimer, 1974, who studied the decision-making process and outcomes; see also McConnell & Mortimer, 1971 and Mortimer & McConnell, 1978.

⁸ Chronister, 1991.

⁹ The survey was adapted from Seagren, Wheeler, Creswell, Miller, and Grassmeyer, 1994, a study of community college academic leaders, but it was revised to include more leadership dimensions.

¹⁰ Williams, Gore, Broches, and Lostoski, 1987.

¹¹ Brown and Miller, 1998 found that problems with minority faculty retention were associated with a multitude of administrative requests for involvement.

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