

Thankless But Vital: The Role of the Faculty Senate Chair

by Larry Hubbell

Despite trends toward greater corporatism and bureaucratization of the academy, some vestiges of shared governance remain, including some level of faculty decision-making in faculty senates or councils. Generalizations about faculty senates are difficult to make because they vary with regard to their level of power and faculty involvement. Nevertheless, more than 90 percent of four-year colleges and universities have some form of a faculty senate.¹ As a former faculty senate chair, I hope that I can alert future faculty senate chairs to the problems they might encounter and offer advice on how one might approach handling those problems.

In the literature and through the lens of my experience, I have found that faculty senates are often looked down upon by trustees, administrators, and faculty alike.² Large portions of the faculty do not see the senate as an important governance body, and indeed, within my own political science department, being a member of faculty senate has usually been viewed as an irrelevant, but necessary form of university service. The standing joke is that when it is time to elect a faculty senator it is best to attend the faculty meeting or else you'll be elected in absentia. Despite these perceptions, faculty senates can and should be an important component of shared governance.

As a faculty senate chair, I held a seat, albeit *ex officio*, on the university's foundation board. In addition, I frequently held one-on-one meetings with the provost and occasionally with the president and members of the board of trustees on legislative issues confronting the senate. I made frequent presentations to the deans' council and served as a liaison between the faculty and the administration regarding personnel and administrative issues. I attended board of trustees meetings. Although these acknowledgements of my status may seem fairly minor, it was heady stuff for a faculty member unaccustomed to the accoutrements of rank. In addition to remaining focused on that fact

that I held the faculty senate seat to represent the faculty, I also had to deal with the issues of legitimacy, disinterest of other faculty senators, and the tendency for my colleagues to become mired in minutiae. Without effective leadership, a faculty senate can become inactive and, in some cases, nothing more than a “ceremonial pastime for faculty.”³

A key lesson I learned is that the faculty senate chair must always be cognizant that he or she is representing the faculty. It is easy to lose sight of this obligation, given the temptations of the office. If one is an effective faculty senate chair and is acknowledged to be such by members of the administration, future benefits may follow—such as a position within the administration, if one so desires.⁴ However, one’s ambition to pursue a career in administration must not soften one’s advocacy of faculty interests, which may, at times, differ from the interests of the administration and the trustees. A heightened sense of careerism can easily lead to an overly deferential approach in dealing with administrators.

How many sins have been committed in the name of collegiality? A worthy value certainly, but occasionally it may be used to paper over differences between faculty and administrator. For the faculty senate chair to be overly deferential to the administration is to stab a knife into the heart of shared governance. If the faculty senate chair and the senate assume such a role, it is likely that such a university would lose many of the characteristics that distinguish academe from traditional organizations.

Let me play devil’s advocate for a moment. Do members of the faculty senate and the faculty senate chair represent the view of the faculty as a



whole or instead do they represent more narrow parochial and personal interests? Do we, in fact, suffer from a lack of legitimacy? These are the questions that we dare not ask, lest we further undermine our position with regard to shared governance. Although shared governance may be less than vibrant at many universities, at least it remains a stalwart component of the presumed culture of academe.

I dealt with the question of legitimacy when the executive committee of our faculty senate confronted the administration about the distribution of faculty salaries. In the prior year, as part of our university's budget request,

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the president of the university with the cooperation of the governor had requested funds to bring full professors' salaries up to national averages. The university received full funding for this request. Unfortunately, when these funds were distributed, some salary money was siphoned off for other purposes, including increases for associate and assistant professors while the full professors remained well below the national averages. The executive committee, whose leadership was dominated by full professors but included some assistant professors, took umbrage with this change in policy, which we regarded as almost a breach of contract. We insisted that a higher principle was at stake, namely that the university administration should use the additional money for the purpose for which it had been originally intended.

We stood on slippery ground. We realized that our faculty senate coalition was fragile, because once an organization receives a budget from its funding source; the budget becomes a zero-sum game. In our vociferous opposition to the distribution, we realized that some of our members would lose while others would gain. How could the coalition be maintained? How could we avoid compromising our legitimacy by seemingly being representative of only our own self-interest? We did so by advocating for salary equity. When we had the opportunity to divert staff salaries for the purpose of enlarging the faculty salary pool, we turned it down. Similarly, several members of the executive committee in a subsequent year supported my bill to raise the salary increase from 10 to 20 percent when a person is promoted from associate to full professor, a measure that would have reduced the salary gap between long-serving full professors and newly promoted ones.

(Unfortunately, that measure did not pass.) In other words, if faculty senate chairs are to maintain their legitimacy, they should place their self-interest behind that of the group interest. It is critical that chairs in this respect serve as models to their members.

As a faculty senate chair, I often had to confront lethargy. It was difficult to recruit faculty to our executive committee. It was difficult, at times, to hold a quorum at faculty senate meetings, to pass legislation. It was especially difficult to recruit faculty willing to run for faculty senate

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chair.⁵ How did I cope with disinterest? First, our meetings are open to the public and we frequently have administrators attend. Indeed, we provide a seat at the head table for our provost and the president, when either attends. Although our provost proved to be a very useful ally on several pieces of legislation, I often found myself opposed to his position, particularly with regard to faculty salaries. Thus, there were times when the members of our executive committee wanted to communicate directly and privately to the senate without the administrators in attendance. Our solution: hold an executive session at the end of our meeting. At times, it resembled a cabal. But it provided us a forum to engage in free conversation that occasionally was critical of the administration. It allowed us to let our hair down, uninhibited by the presence of administrators.

Second, a parliamentarian was absolutely essential to occasionally limit debate. As we all know, academics like to hear their own voices. There were times when a few members of the senate became fixated on minutiae. Although these few were absorbed by their own verbosity, most of the other members were bored. How does a chair maintain a balance between too much debate and heedlessly rushing legislation through? In part, it depends on the subject. Most members appreciate it when the chair tries to push through legislation, like a change in course syllabus policy; but they don't want to be rushed regarding legislation that involves higher stakes.

I believe it is essential that the position of the faculty senate chair and the institution of the faculty senate continue, despite the obstacles—the temptations of power, the tendency toward lethargy, the fixation on the inconsequential—mentioned in this article. Although in the age of the corporate university, shared governance may be seriously weakened, it is important to maintain as much of it as we can. After all, shared governance

and with it democratic decision-making distinguishes academe from other institutions within our society. To maintain our academic culture, especially academic freedom, we must resist attempts to model the university after its corporate counterparts. nea

ENDNOTES

1. See William Waugh. "Conflicting Values and Cultures: The Managerial Threat to University Governance." *Policy Studies Review*; Neil Hamilton. "The Academic Profession's Leadership Role in Shared Governance." *Liberal Education*; Gary Rhoades. "Capitalism, Academic Style, and Shared Governance." *Academe*; Gilda Lerner. "Corporatizing Higher Education." *The History Teacher*; Robin Matross Helms and Tanya Price. "Who Needs a Faculty Senate?" *Academe*; Robert Birnbaum. "The End of Shared Governance: Looking Ahead or Looking Back." *The Journal of Higher Education*; Douglas J. Toma. "Expanding Peripheral Activities, Increasing Accountability Demands and Reconsidering Governance in U.S. Higher Education." *Higher Education Research and Development*; and J.E. Gilmour. "Participative Governance Bodies in Higher Education." *New Directions for Higher Education*.
2. See M. Trow. "The Academic Senate as a School for University Leadership." *Liberal Education*, 25; James T. Minor. "Understanding Faculty Senates." *Review of Higher Education*, 343; and Kenneth P. Mortimer and Colleen O'Brien Sathre. *The Art and Politics of Academic Governance*, 30.
3. James T. Minor. "Assessing the Senate." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 960-77.
4. Dean Campbell. "Leadership and Academic Culture in the Senate Presidency." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 954.
5. Abraham Edel. *The Struggle for Academic Democracy*, 148; George Fallis. *Multiversities, Ideas, and Democracy*, 417; and Jeff Mitchell. "A Communitarian Alternative." *Academe*, 49.

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