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The Faculty's Role in Shared Governance in an Administrative Age

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The Faculty's Role in Shared Governance in an Administrative Age

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Scott Peters, "The Faculty's Role in Shared Governance in an Administrative Age"

As Benjamin Ginsburg and Dan Power describe elsewhere in this forum, changes in higher education are placing new strains on traditional notions of shared governance. The same diffuse, complex forces that are challenging traditional ways of delivering a college education are pushing colleges and universities toward a more administrative model of decision making. The rise of the administrative university also challenges the role of the faculty within traditional shared governance models, which center on shared responsibility and joint action. If the faculty wishes to remain relevant in shared governance systems today, we must find new ways to assert our influence within existing structures and processes, create new structures and processes where necessary, and seek new opportunities to convince key decision makers of the value of our contribution to the governance of the university

Nearly fifty years ago, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a joint statement with the American Association of Colleges and Universities. The 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities recognizes the role of the governing board, the president and the faculty in governing the university, and it describes how these actors should jointly make decisions. Generally, the board sets the overall mission and strategic goals of the university, the president helps set the university's goals and leads it to achieve them, and the faculty has "primary responsibility" for the curriculum, the content of instruction, the conduct of research, and the status of faculty appointments. The Statement urges the board and president to recognize the faculty's primary responsibility over these areas, to "undertake appropriate self-limitation," and to overrule faculty decisions "only in exceptional circumstances, and for reasons communicated to the faculty." The Statement further recognizes that even in those areas where the board or the president have primary responsibility, such as in setting goals, making budgets, or hiring presidents or other key administrators, the board and president should "be aided by" or "utilize the judgments of" other actors, including the faculty.

Today, these principles are increasingly threatened. The winds buffeting higher education today have (sometimes blatantly and sometimes subtly) changed the ways in which universities do business. First and foremost, declining state support for higher education has remade the public university. Decreases in state support have led to an increased focus on tuition revenue and therefore on student recruitment and retention, which in turn has contributed to growth of the role of non-academic student services within the university. Even as state support has decreased, appropriations seem to come with more conditions and more demands to demonstrate

accountability. Last year the Iowa Legislature passed a law mandating that the Regents' universities demonstrate "continuous improvement" in our courses, for example. Similarly, in order to demonstrate to the legislature and the state the "value added" by higher education, the Board of Regents today requires considerable reporting from the state's universities about everything from budgets to details about faculty activities or PDA requests. Increased reliance on external funding, whether governmental or private, comes with its own set of strings, and therefore administrative burdens. Additional administrative work imposed upon universities can also be hidden in other educational policies (see, e.g., state teacher certification requirements, or the Common Core Curriculum standards for K-12 education that Iowa has signed onto). Administrative burdens on universities have also increased due to larger changes in society, including some changes that everyone should applaud: increased access by first generation college students, students with disabilities, or with mental health issues, or other populations of students who therefore need to be tracked more closely inside and outside of the classroom. Such developments have contributed to the growth in the number of administrators at American universities and have also made the day-to-day jobs of faculty members more administrative in nature than they were a generation ago.

So what should shared governance look like in this more administrative age? First, it is important to note that these changes have not made the 1966 Statement on Shared Governance or the principles it embodies irrelevant. However, they do compel faculty members to seek new ways to assert faculty prerogatives and protect our interest in overseeing the curriculum and influencing the overall direction of the university. If we fail to take such actions, we risk seeing faculty responsibilities within the shared governance system shrink until they are meaningless. In order to accomplish this, we must do a better job anticipating the problems that are headed our way, we must be more intentional and more strategic about our actions, and we must become more adept at communicating with one another, with administrators, and with the university's external constituencies.

First, we must have vision. We must know what direction we want the university to move toward, anticipate challenges to the university and the faculty, and then propose concrete ways to address them. Too often, the faculty finds itself in the position of responding to actions taken by the legislature, the Board or the administration. Sometimes this is inevitable, because issues truly arise out of the blue -- the controversy over tuition set-asides, for example. But when the challenges are clear and we know what they are, we should not wait for others to make proposals about how to deal with them. When we see budget cuts on the horizon, for example, we should propose specific ways to address them and demand that the administration respond to these proposals after due consideration. This principle extends to curricular issues, which are at the heart of the faculty's role in shared governance. Within the past year, we have seen considerable damage done to the faculty's control over the University's curriculum. Most obvious was last spring's administration-led elimination of programs that it deemed unsustainable. More overlooked, however, might have been the legislature's "continuous improvement" legislation mandating outcomes assessment in our courses. And there could be more on the horizon, as the Board of Regents is currently considering hiring outside consultants to look for "efficiencies" in the Regents system, a project that could include review of academic programs. If the faculty

wants to maintain control over curriculum and protect our freedom to design and assess our own courses and programs, obstreperousness is not enough. We must figure out ways to demonstrate to the legislature, the Board, and the administration that our curriculum is demanding, regularly updated, and serves the interests of our students and the state.

We also need to find ways to give teeth to faculty positions and proposals. A Senate resolution can only go so far if there is no mechanism by which faculty can enforce it. At UNI, this can most readily be seen in the area of budgeting. Without meaningful faculty participation in budgeting -- many campuses have budget advisory committees -- there is no way for the faculty to carry its views into effect. We need to work to make sure that faculty are present on key advisory committees across campus so that the ultimate decision-makers regularly hear the considered judgment of faculty representatives. And where appropriate, we should propose changes to University policy to assure that key decisions cannot be made without faculty. It is true that policy changes are no guarantee; nothing stops a university from violating its own policies. But should such violations occur, the moral suasion of the faculty is only strengthened.

All of this requires effective communication. We are all aware of the need for communication between administrators and faculty. For shared governance to be effective these channels of communication must go in both directions. When this works well, faculty leaders will be able to relay areas of faculty concern to the Board of Regents and to administrators on campus. Faculty leaders will also get information from those sources about a variety of issues that are important to the faculty as a whole but which may not yet be on the radar of most faculty members; therefore, another important function of faculty governance must be communicating and educating the faculty about those issues so that the faculty as a whole, including all relevant faculty committees and assemblies, are fully informed to take action as necessary. We must also seek ways to help administrators understand that they benefit from a traditional shared governance system, which promotes transparency, collaboration, and therefore legitimacy. Even those adversely affected by decisions are more likely to recognize those decisions as legitimate when they've been openly debated and when all affected were able to participate in the discussions. Finally, faculty must communicate the importance of our participation in the governance of the university to the legislature and to the citizens of the state. We must explain that our participation enhances the university and we must convince our stakeholders of the value of our essential role in making decisions that affect UNI.

Up to this point in the history of universities, the faculty have been essential to the success of any institution of higher education. From a crude marketing perspective, we were the product that the university was selling, and there was high demand for that product. This gave the faculty tremendous power and influence within university governance. Today, however, new modes of delivering coursework are making tenured and tenure-track faculty less essential, and therefore weaken our influence within the decision making bodies of the university. Nonetheless, the Board, the administration, and the faculty share a lot of common ground. All have an interest in the continued viability of UNI, the strengths of which rest on its small class sizes, personal attention from faculty, and devotion to the liberal arts. That is our competitive advantage against online programs, for-profit schools, and our much larger, more research-focused sister

institutions. Just as UNI will thrive by promoting its excellent faculty, the faculty will thrive by asserting our own importance within the university. As we do this, we can re-establish the joint operation of the university that the AAUP's statement envisions and we can strengthen UNI to continue to serve our students as best as possible.

Sources cited

American Association of University Professors. 1966. Statement of Government of Colleges and Universities. <http://www.aaup.org/report/1966-statement-government-colleges-and-universities>.



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