

# Shared Governance in Colleges and Universities

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A Statement by the  
Higher Education  
Program and  
Policy Council



*A Union of Professionals*

AFT Higher Education



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# Foreword

For a number of years, we have been hearing calls for a new, more “efficient” way of administering our institutions of higher education. It is said that:

- times have changed;
- colleges and universities ought to be run more like businesses;
- the rapid technological changes taking place—computerization, the Internet, Web-based courses—require adaptability;
- the marketplace of higher education is rapidly changing, with wholly online institutions and for-profit universities creating competitive challenges to our traditional ways;
- faculty are too slow to make decisions to adapt to change and cling to outmoded models of deliberation and reflection when action is required;
- faculty resist efforts to keep the curriculum up to date and inappropriately inject politics—multiculturalism, liberalism—into it; and
- the tenure system stands as an obstacle to greater accountability and improved performance.

Because an ever-growing number of board members and administrators with this mindset have reached positions of responsibility on campus, a direct assault is being launched on the practice of shared governance in higher education. There is a feeling among political leaders, boards of governors (regents or trustees) and top administrators (chancellors, presidents and the like) that any sharing of authority impedes their “right” to make the big decisions. They believe that they know what is best and that faculty and staff should step aside and let the managers take charge.

The American Federation of Teachers, on the other hand, believes this is exactly the wrong way to run a successful college or university. **We believe that all college and university employees—top tenured faculty, junior faculty, temporary and part-time/adjunct faculty, graduate teaching and research assistants, professional staff with and without faculty rank, the classified and support staff that keep the educational enterprise going—should have a guaranteed voice in decision-making, a role in shaping policy in the areas of their expertise.**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document, terms such as “faculty,” “professional staff” and “staff” (which includes classified and support staff as well as professionals) will be used to refer to the wide variety of college and university employees listed above. The broad range of job titles, nomenclature and ranking systems at each institution makes it impossible to use more specific or uniform terminology.

# The Shared Governance Crisis

## What Is Shared Governance? Why Is It Important?

Shared governance is the set of practices under which college faculty and staff participate in significant decisions concerning the operation of their institutions. Colleges and universities are very special types of institutions with a unique mission—the creation and dissemination of ideas. For that reason, they have created particular arrangements to serve that mission best. For example, academic tenure protects the status, academic freedom and independent voice of scholars and teachers. Shared governance, in turn, arose out of a recognition that:

- academic decision-making should be largely independent of short-term managerial and political considerations;
- faculty and professional staff are in the best position to shape and implement curriculum and research policy, to select academic colleagues and judge their work; and
- the perspective of all front-line personnel is invaluable in making sound decisions about allocating resources, setting goals, choosing top officers and guiding student life.

It is widely understood that broad participation in decision-making increases the level of employee investment in the institution's success. As a result, organizational theorists for many years have recommended shared decision-making as a key strategy to improve productivity in all kinds of organizations. In higher education, due to the high turnover rate of top administrators, the faculty and staff are often in the best position to provide the institutional history so valuable to institutional planning. Without that institutional history, institutions are apt to repeat past failures.

## Why Is Shared Governance Under Attack?

Until recently, top college administrators, boards of trustees and political leaders could be counted on to recognize and defend the right of individual faculty and staff members and their representative assemblies to participate in the design and implementation of the educational goals and policies of the institution. But no longer. Why?

Increasing numbers of public officials, institutional board members and administrators have come to view higher education as a multi-billion-dollar industry, with money and power to be amassed and used for purposes remote from core academic values such as contemplation, reflection, neutrality, objectivity and critical thinking. To exploit the commer-

cial and political potential of this industry, they seek to run our colleges more on a “corporatized” business model. The corporate model is characterized by commercializing and breaking apart the elements that make higher education great.

The corporatized college president has become the CEO, no longer the academic leader. The agendas of the top administrators in public colleges often are informed by political considerations, not academic ones. The educational mission is seen as just one aspect of a multi-faceted “business” in which the institution is engaged, which may include job training, entertainment, sports, housing, health care, and private corporate research and development. Under the guise of efficiency and confidentiality, top administrators are being recruited by professional search firms with a diminished faculty role in their selection. The voice of the faculty and staff is relegated to an advisory role rather than that of a full partner in the institution’s success.

### **The Real Crisis In Shared Governance**

The corporatized model of college governance has engendered a real crisis in higher education. It threatens the integrity of the key educational and research functions that faculty and staff perform, through:

- outsourcing jobs essential to instruction, including the design of courses and introduction of computer-based teaching elements;
- redirecting the teaching of courses from full-time dedicated professionals to exploited part-time and temporary faculty, graduate teaching and research assistants, with low pay, little security and no academic freedom;
- re-orienting the curriculum toward business-oriented coursework, including more courses designed to “train” students for the “real-world.” Traditionally “academic” courses are pressured to be more “practical,” and generally there is less concern for a broad-based liberal arts curriculum intended to help students develop and mature intellectually into critically thinking democratic citizens;
- buying and selling “courseware,” through the appropriation of computer-based intellectual property for purposes of commercial exploitation;
- developing for-profit teaching and/or research subsidiaries of colleges and universities, which are out of the reach of public scrutiny; and
- forming commercial consortia with other universities and private investors.

Increased workloads, restrictive tenure standards, pressures to incorporate new technologies in teaching and demoralization resulting from top-level assertions of power have had the predictable, if perverse, effect of decreasing the willingness of faculty and staff to participate in the shared governance of their institutions.

The erosion of shared governance imperils the elements that produce quality education and scholarship. Shared governance is like the system of checks and balances in state and federal government. Excessive power and control concentrated in any one level of the institu-

tion virtually guarantees that there will be a distorted perspective on crucial aspects of the academic enterprise. When politicians, boards and administrators seek to “corporatize” higher education, they hurt the recipients of educational value, namely students and the public.

### **Shared Governance Should Be Strengthened and Expanded**

The interdependence among constituent groups at all levels of the college requires complex coordination, excellent communication among the levels, and appropriate joint planning and execution. Faculty and administrators depend on a wide variety of specialist co-workers to perform their academic functions. In the increasingly complex world of higher education, many of the traditional duties of those holding faculty rank have been reassigned or shared with other professionals. For instance, many groups of specialists assist in key ways:

- student counselors provide academic and career guidance;
- information technologists help enhance teaching, learning and research; and
- laboratory managers and assistants maintain and teach scientific work in laboratories.

Part-time/adjunct faculty used to be literally adjunct to the central instructional function, but they have become indispensable and ubiquitous, though overused and exploited, in many colleges. Classified and support staff, traditionally not represented at the table, also deserve representative participation in making decisions related to their areas of expertise.

Employees of all kinds have long sought vehicles for effective voice in workplace decisions, often through unions and professional associations. In some states and institutions, staff members without faculty rank have been explicitly included—sometimes mandated by statute—in representative decision-making and planning committees, task forces and assemblies. At hundreds of institutions, academic and classified staff have expressed their right to be heard through engagement in collective bargaining. In still other cases, their voice is ignored. When their influence is denied a place in policy making, the institution and its students suffer.

# Six Principles of Shared Governance

The following are six basic principles of shared governance that should be observed in establishing, maintaining and strengthening our institutions.

## **Faculty and professional staff set academic standards and curriculum**

Faculty and professional staff, particularly those directly involved in teaching and conducting research, should have the lead role in determining the content of the curriculum, degree and certificate requirements, standards of instruction, student achievement standards, grading, and all matters relating to student progress in academic programs. To fulfill this responsibility effectively, faculty and professional staff must be given access to information and resources. Their judgments should be subject to overrule only rarely, with compelling reasons provided in writing and with an opportunity for response by the faculty and professional staff.

## **Faculty and professional staff require academic freedom**

Faculty and professional staff must be able to exercise independent academic judgment in the conduct of their teaching and research. Administrators should not interfere in these matters except in proven cases of academic incompetence or wrongdoing. A strong tenure system is the bulwark of protecting academic freedom against intimidation and arbitrary dismissal. Beyond that, protections of free expression should be extended to all staff to ensure openness, objectivity and creativity.

## **Faculty and professional staff should have primacy in decisions on academic personnel and status**

Faculty should have the primary role in interviewing and recommending candidates for academic appointment to the faculty, for tenure and promotion, research support, sabbaticals, and other incentives and measures of academic quality. Similarly, professional staff should have the primary role in interviewing and recommending candidates for appointment to their ranks, for advancement in academic status and promotion and for other incentives and measures of professional quality. Administrative overrule of these decisions should be rare and for compelling reasons, given in writing, and be subject to individual and collective response.

## **Participation in shared governance should be expanded**

A well-functioning college or university is one that ensures that *all* faculty and *all* staff—from full professors to adjunct lecturers, from librarians to departmental support staff—

have suitable arrangements for their voices to be heard and given proper weight in decisions that affect the mission and operation of the institution. For example, all faculty and staff should play a direct and prominent role in developing and advising on institutional budgets. All faculty and staff should have a leading role on institutional committees, task forces and decision-making bodies that affect their work and are within their areas of expertise, including search committees for choosing presidents and administrators.

Given the growing interdependence among faculty, staff, students, administrators and institutional boards, all of those who aid in the design and/or implementation of the academic mission of the college or university have a stake in shared governance. While full-time faculty have traditionally been able to claim a central role along with top administrators and boards, a number of trends, accelerating since the last quarter of the twentieth century, favor the expansion of governance roles to other staff. For instance, the increased specialization of traditional academic functions, away from active faculty involvement and toward professional and technical personnel, necessitates the inclusion of these experts into appropriate roles in shared governance. Similarly, the enlargement of the role of non-tenure-track and part-time/adjunct faculty, as well as of graduate employees (teaching and research assistants) calls for the development of appropriate means and mechanisms to draw them into shared governance.

The forms of shared governance and degrees of participation will vary according to the particular institutional arrangements currently in place, but each group whose work contributes to the academic enterprise should be involved in a manner appropriate to its institutional function and responsibilities.

### **Unions, representative assemblies and faculty senates all can have significant roles in shared governance**

The organizational forms of shared governance differ among institutions, depending on institutional history, norms and customs. In many institutions, these forms are called senates or assemblies, though these terms are not definitive, for faculty senates may include or exclude administrators, non-teaching professionals, non-tenure-track and part-time faculty.

In many colleges and universities, faculty and staff have turned to collective bargaining, both as a way to increase the influence of their voices, to provide institutional means for their voices to be heard and represented in the absence of pre-existing roles for them in shared governance, or to support and bolster the existing structures of shared governance. Unionization is a basic democratic right of all employees. Higher education unions are democratically elected representatives of these employees with a legitimate role in shared governance.

A standard management tactic, however, is to attempt to convince faculty and staff—especially during campaigns to establish collective bargaining—that the existence of a faculty or staff union will destroy the “collegiality” of the shared governance process. In particular, the argument goes, the union will take over the powers and responsibilities of the faculty senate or whatever the governance body is called.

**The position of the American Federation of Teachers has always been that the functions of the union and the governance bodies *complement*, rather than compete with, each other.** Despite predictions by opponents of unionization that the presence of a faculty or staff union would destroy the shared governance body and shatter collegiality, this observation is unfounded. In fact, the opposite is often true.

Unions and collective bargaining do not and should not supplant effective structures of shared governance, i.e., those structures that derive their legitimacy from genuine representation of faculty and staff. When faculty and staff choose unions and collective bargaining, they do so because a clear majority believe that the existing structure is not sufficient to guarantee full and true collegiality—the kind that comes from working with top administrators and board members as equal partners on the basis of legally enforceable rights and responsibilities.

**Specifically, collective bargaining strengthens collegiality by establishing and enforcing contractual ground rules supporting it.** Typically, committee procedures developed in the institution's shared governance traditions have been incorporated into union contracts, strengthening the senate's (or other body's) role and preserving collegial practices. One can think of it in the following way: the union itself is *one form* of shared governance, but one that is able to create the conditions under which other shared governance mechanisms like the faculty senate can operate successfully and without administrative interference. In the end, we believe that the strongest shared governance systems are based on sound collective bargaining contracts that clearly delineate an active role for faculty and staff at the institution.

On a college-by-college basis, it is important that the respective roles of the union and the shared governance structures be understood mutually. There is no one template for shared governance for all institutions of higher education, nor should there be. Differences among colleges will be based, among other things, on the federal, state and local legal mandates governing particular colleges and universities, on the requirements of applicable labor laws, on institutional traditions, on the terms of the collective bargaining agreement and on the institution's circumstances of labor-management relations.

### **Accrediting agencies should support fully the concept of shared governance in their standards**

Regional and specialized accrediting agencies, whose role it is to establish standards for higher education institutions, should guarantee that enforceable shared governance procedures are not only included in written institutional policies, but also are practiced in reality. For instance, as institutions shift more course work into a distance education medium, accrediting agencies should ensure that faculty and staff remain as deeply involved in setting curriculum and academic standards as they are in traditional courses and that their teaching continues to be protected by academic freedom.

# Conclusion

**I**n whatever shared governance structures exist or are created, faculty and staff must have representatives of their own choosing. They must respect the rights of other participants in shared governance.

Institutional structures of shared governance should be constructed to incorporate the views of faculty and staff at all levels of decision-making. The institution's administrators must provide the participants in shared governance time, encouragement and the information necessary to be effective.

Shared governance is vital to maintain the academic integrity of our colleges and universities, to prevent the pressures of commercialization from distorting the institution's educational mission or eroding standards and quality, and to uphold the ideals of academic freedom and democratic practice. Strengthening shared governance is the responsibility of all colleges and universities, and a *priority* of our union.



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