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Examining the Responsibilities of Faculty Senates

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Keywords

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EXAMINING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF FACULTY SENATES

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Abstract

Faculty senates function to preserve and represent the interest of the faculty during the decision-making process. The purpose of this article is to initiate dialogue focused on increasing the influence of the faculty senates in an era of declining power.

Introduction

The resignation of nationally prominent search consultant, R. William Funk, after a vote of “no confidence” by the faculty senate at Florida State University “may be the first of its kind” according to an article in *Inside Higher Ed* written by Rivard (2014), and if other faculty senates opt to take similar actions “the spread of no-confidence votes could further complicate presidential searches”. Why is this happening and what is at stake? There is a decline in the power of faculty to influence decisions on college campuses, particularly those related to the academic mission of colleges and universities and perhaps nowhere is the tension more pronounced than in the choice of the president. Take the advice of Burgan (2006) in “What Ever Happened to the Faculty? Drift and Decision in Higher Education” as a call to action:

In the arid contemporary atmosphere of charge and countercharge, academics need to find ways to bring back cool reason and philosophical calm (Burgan, p. xxviii). The future of higher education will challenge the professoriate to welcome innovations, revive institutional and professional loyalties, and even adjust some traditional definitions and practices. The moral power of faculty colleagues coming together under these challenges recalls other eras when American’s academics outlasted the incursions of politics, managerial authoritarianism, or even their inertia to preserve the academy’s essential commitment to academic freedom and mutuality in governance (p. 207).

If Burgan’s call to action heeded, a framework for understanding ways to engage faculty in a variety of leadership roles would be needed to guide the discourse. The purpose of this article was to begin a dialogue to inform this discourse based on a review of relevant literature, original research, and practice. There has been a decline in the power of faculty to influence decisions on college campuses—even those related to areas traditionally thought to be exclusively the domain of the faculty—including the academic mission of colleges and universities, the curriculum, and delivery method of courses. According to Gerber (2014) in the last several decades, shared governance has been on the decline. This study notes a series of drawn-out faculty-administrative battles over how to balance budgets, lay off faculty, or introduce curricular changes at colleges and universities of all types. Gerber says public disinvestment from higher education triggered many of these conflicts, but he also attributes them to two other factors: an emerging management model that prioritizes institutional “efficiency” and “flexibility” over academic values, and the decline of tenure and the related rise of adjunct faculty employment.

Literature Review

Shared governance is not a simple matter of committee consensus, or the faculty's engaging administrators to take on the dirty work or any number of other common misconceptions. Shared governance is much more complicated; it is a delicate balance between faculty and staff participation in planning and decision-making processes, on the one hand, and administrative accountability on the other (Olson, 2009). "Shared governance in higher education is a critical component of academic management. The use of faculty senates is the primary mechanism for engaging faculty, yet these bodies increasingly are viewed as ineffective" (Miller, Smith, & Nadler, 2016, p. 22). Tierney & Minor, (2003) found that the majority of campus constituents believe that shared governance is important but have little confidence in the senate's ability to influence important decisions. Mason (1972) states that faculty senates have general legislative authority over educational matters concerning the institution. However, faculty senates do not have authority over the internal affairs of a college, school, or department unless the matters occur that materially affect the interests of the institution. When it comes to the senate making decisions, there should be a consensus in action.

According to Mason (1972), faculty senates have jurisdiction over the following: standards for admission, selection, and retention applicable to all students of the institution; requirements for granting of degrees applicable to all students of the institution; curricular requirements; instructional standards throughout the institution; promotion and tenure as well as facilitation of academic and instructional research; procedures for faculty participation in the selection and retention of deans; standards for public information programs dealing with educational matters; standards of academic freedom throughout the institution; and standards for student affairs. "If faculty senates want to maintain a voice in institutional governance, then they must be both effective and viewed as such by the faculty, administrators, and other campus stakeholders," (D'Souza et al., 2011, p. 16).

Advocacy

Advocacy is providing public support for several causes and policies. Advocacy serves a vital function of faculty senates, the very existence of which acknowledges the need for faculty representation among the competing stakeholders that comprise what former University of California Chancellor, Clark Kerr famously termed, "the multiversity" (Kerr, 1991). Kerr's words describe a shift from the antiquated "university," where institutions of higher education organized around a more singular, unified purpose to educate students for democratic citizenship. What Kerr (1991) describes as a "multiversity" continues to this day to be of interest to many people such as faculty, student, staff, alumni, communities, businesses, government, and a host of other stakeholders. Sometimes these interests connect easily; other times, the conflict in ways that cause significant harm to one or more of the stakeholders. The first part of skilled advocacy is understanding this political situation and thoughtfully examining both the potential barriers and the leverage it might provide as the context of any advocacy initiative.

Understanding the political situation is easier said than done in any organization, notably higher education institutions which tend to be notoriously complex and decentralized. Also, power relations are often masked in seemingly neutral notions of "just the way things are." Consequently, reading and understanding the higher education institutions' political realities begins with asking critical questions about how power structures operate in the present as well as how they came to be.

We are seeing and understanding politics in higher education systems which serves as an initial step in successful advocacy. The next step involves framing advocacy initiatives in the context of these politics. Birnbaum (2004) provides useful insight into how political dynamics and power structures shift according to management fads popular at various times throughout history and in our current moment. His account of business trends applied to higher education can facilitate our understanding of where both political landmines and opportunities might affect advocacy efforts. Advocacy initiatives rarely fail or succeed on their merit. Power structures must be leveraged with savvy diplomacy to gain the broader institutional support necessary to sustain an advocacy cause.

The final step we will discuss here with regards to effective advocacy is that of relationship building. Given the frequently harsh political climate of today's colleges and universities, allies provide essential support and protection for those engaged in advocacy efforts. Advocacy almost always involves challenging the status quo in some way so anticipating pushback can preempt being blindsided by it.

"If administrators act as if they are responsible for the formulation of institutional policy, then faculty members will have to re-establish their influence through collective action" (Birgquist & Pawlak, 2008, p. 111). The following section explores how faculty have read the current political situation, articulated their position, and attempted to develop coalitions around crucial issues like academic freedom and shared governance.

Several universities, including the University of Florida (2018), have created procedures in which faculty can play a more active role in supporting the university by meeting with legislators and potential donors. Interested faculty are asked to register their availability to speak with legislators and attend a training session to learn about the legislative process. These are ways in which faculty can contribute to the success of the university. The University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh (2018) has developed a faculty advocacy committee, in which the committee makes recommendations regarding the tremendous development of harmonious campus-community relationships. The committee also seeks "methods for improving communication between all groups within and outside the University to create effective methods of advocacy."

Given this emerging leadership crisis, we are particularly interested in what it means to be a faculty leader, understanding types of faculty leadership roles, preparation for these roles, and whether there is a shortage of individuals to fill these roles. We seek to inform the discourse by contributing to our understanding of ways faculty engage in leadership and ways to engage faculty in a variety of leadership roles. For these reasons, the Center for Higher Education began to conceptualize a framework for the National Study of Faculty Leadership. We started by asking: Who are faculty leaders? After coming up with a list including program coordinators, department chairs, chairs of a significant college or university-level committees, and faculty senate chairs; we decided to focus first on faculty senate (assembly) chairs (leaders).

Faculty Senates

There are some essential aspects of faculty senates that guided our approach and the initial development of our survey instrument. Minor (2003) conducted a national study on faculty senates investigating factors that contribute to senate effectiveness. Minor (2003) developed four models to establish a conceptual framework to investigate faculty senates: traditional, influential, dormant, and cultural. Traditional faculty senates maintain control in areas that have traditionally been the domain of the faculty: curriculum, program requirements, tenure, and promotion. Their limited influence on matters concerning budgets, strategic,

planning, and external relations. Furthermore, Minor (2003) states that traditional faculty senates function to preserve and represent the interest of the faculty during the decision-making process.

Influential faculty senates have authority over all academic matters and matters concerning budgets, athletics, and development. Influential faculty senates are well organized, proactive, and assertive. Their interests extend beyond faculty related issues, but to the institution. Dormant faculty senates are usually inactive and exist as a ceremonial pastime for faculty. These senates do not have a role in the decision-making process.

The cultural dynamics of the institution tends to influence the culture of faculty senates. Informal processes maneuvered by senior faculty members may weigh more heavily on decision outcomes rather than the formal processes of the faculty senate. As the cultural dynamics change in the institution, so does a cultural faculty senate's decision-making process. Minor (2003) also notes that some faculty senates can fall between or across models and that no model is more effective than another. In some ways, we have picked up where Minor left off. However, while we are interested in the functions of the senate, we are also interested in the specific role of the faculty senate leader. The question is, what are the responsibilities of the faculty senates?

The National Study of Faculty Leadership

Data for the current study were extracted from The National Study of Faculty Leadership (NSFL) conducted by Ohio University's Center for Higher Education. The purpose of the NSFL is to investigate faculty's role in shared governance and to collect information about faculty leaders in general. The sample consists of 153 senate leaders from doctoral, master's, and baccalaureate degree-granting institutions across the United States. Most senate leaders are male being 60% and 40% identifying as female. Faculty Senate leaders were asked to rate the level of influence that the faculty senate has on various institutional areas and concepts. The results of the survey indicated that most faculty senates are directly responsible for academic freedom (60%), committee appointments (74%), curriculum and academic programs (66%), and faculty grievances (51%). Areas in which most faculty senates serve in an advisory capacity include institutional accreditation (61%), budget planning (64%), diversity and equity initiatives (65%), facility management (59%), student conduct (51%), and faculty workload (53%). Lastly, most faculty senates have no influence on faculty compensation (51%) and faculty retirement (56%).

The National Study of Faculty Leadership currently does not have information regarding faculty senate leaders of two-year and baccalaureate institutions. Even though plans are currently in the making for collecting information on faculty senates at baccalaureate institutions, it was not available during the time of this study. Overall, faculty senates can serve as an advisory board to the administration, act as a liaison for the faculty with the administration and the general public, serve as a legislative body for academic issues, and serve as a gatekeeper for academic freedom.

Discussion

Faculty senates can influence the way faculty members choose to participate in university governance. Faculty senates overall tend to be responsible for ensuring academic freedom, committee appointments, curriculum and academic programs, and faculty grievances. These are areas that faculty members tend to be responsible throughout most institutions of higher learning. Areas that faculty senates appear to have no responsibility or only advisory influence are retirement plans, faculty compensation, and campus facilities. These are areas that are usually managed by administrators. According to Birnbaum (1988), faculty senates are trying to

maintain aspects of collegiality by emphasizing shared authority and nonhierarchical relationships; as well as encourage the members of the institution to engage in more personal interactions and make decisions as a consensus. Bess and Dee (2008) describe the challenges that many institutions face, as they encase in a bureaucratic system in a hierarchical structure.

There is a tendency for both administrators and faculty members to have low opinions of faculty senates. In addition, Kezar (2004) describes how administrators view the faculty senate as a slow and ineffective organization. It is essential for faculty senates to develop clear policy and procedures that highlight how they influence decisions at the University. Without this type of document, faculty members must rely on administrators to make decisions based on the same values held by the faculty. Faculty members and administrators must share the same values and goals in order to come to a consensus on decisions. Although each constituency groups have different perspectives, the good of the institution should be the primary shared goal. Administrators and faculty need to work together in creating a collegial academic environment.

During a time in which many institutions are facing severe budget cuts and thereby making sacrifices in order to maintain daily operations, the role of the faculty senate can be critical in the decision-making process. Faculty members must challenge their senates to assert their authority over designated areas of responsibilities and encourage advisory/influential capacities in areas that are designated to other constituencies.

Implications for Practice

In addressing the implications for practice, there prove to be several items to consider. A first item to consider is that of utilizing the information presented within this article to help develop policies for faculty leadership and shared governance. This approach would provide faculty senates with an opportunity to become more influential in the decision-making process of administrative decision making. Another element to consider is encouraging collaboration with other advocacy organizations (for example, the Student Government Association). Student input proves to be a targeted objective of many organizations. Moreover, allowing students to provide faculty senates with feedback on an issue will only help strengthen their influence in the decision-making process of administrative bodies.

Outside of this, helping institutions define faculty senate leadership and their role in institutional governance will allow senates to participate in the decision making process actively. As a result, the amount of impact that faculty senates have could prove to be instrumental in the amount of change experienced by a specific college or university. Faculty Senate leaders should attend workshops and professional development seminars to develop their leadership skills in order to lead the senate effectively. Through their participation in workshops, members of the faculty senate could establish beneficial connections which will allow them to develop in more effective ways. Besides, the professional development, faculty senate leaders have a direct impact on a college or university through their involvement within the faculty senate. Furthermore, improved leadership skills can prove to be influential regardless of what field the senate leader belongs.

Implications for Further Research

In addition to the practical recommendations for this specific article, there also proves to be items considered for future research. One such item relates to expanding the study using a qualitative approach. In this study, a quantitative approach was utilized, and although the data presented help to showcase the effectiveness of faculty senates within higher education, a qualitative approach could prove to be even more beneficial. One recommendation related to a

qualitative approach would be to utilize focus groups or even interviews with senate leaders to collect more information related to the issues of faculty senates within higher education. Using a longitudinal methodology may be considered to see if faculty senate leaders' opinions have changed following this specific study. Such information would prove to be incredibly valuable in determining the effectiveness of the information presented within this study.

Conclusion

Faculty senates remain an essential part of campus governance. The role of faculty extends far beyond conducting research, teaching, and service. The roles and responsibilities of a university's faculty senate are changing, but the constant should be shared governance and its responsibility to share with the administration the day-to-day governance of the university. Faculty senates serve a vital role in ensuring governance, on educational policy and welfare, recommendation concerning campus and university budgets, criteria for faculty tenure, appointment and promotion.

Additionally, faculty senates serve essential symbolic functions such as defining authority relationships, providing a ritual for faculty members, and promoting important professional and institutional values (Birnbaum, 1989). Although government agencies, trustees, and university presidents will affect campus governance, faculty often are deemed the most conspicuous of internal governing bodies. They are structurally and culturally diverse and have varying levels of influence on many decisions (Minor, 2003). Each faculty member should actively participate in this process.

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