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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an alternative view of shared governance within higher education institutions, examining the major problems encountered by institutions as they implement a shared governance model. Based on a review of the literature, it argues that shared governance, though increasingly popular in recent years, is an issue that should be carefully explored before it is implemented. The paper notes that shared governance is an elusive concept, and that participants often over-anticipate the benefit, while at the same time, under-commit their own involvement in understanding what shared governance is. Critics have noted that shared governance involves a large commitment of time and effort and requires that senior-level administrators commit real support to the process. It argues that shared governance has a limited ability to extricate the governing effort from the mire of self-interest, unreal expectation, and role confusion. The paper concludes that shared governance is not a panacea, and that successfully governed institutions have an established history and culture of administration-faculty collaboration. (Contains 17 references.) (MDM)

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Shared Governance: Balancing the Euphoria

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Abstract

This paper is intended to offer an alternative view of shared governance. Based on what is published, it is apparent that shared governance is an issue which should be carefully explored before any higher education institution attempts to adopt it. Shared governance is an elusive concept. Participants often over-anticipate the benefit, while at the same time, under-commit their own involvement in understanding what shared governance is. Shared governance is at best a process. Within the higher education collegial environment the parallel tracks of academics and administration mix and merge via the processes of shared governance. It is an uncomfortable alliance at best. This paper outlines the major problems encountered by institutions as they implement a shared governance model.

Introduction:

In recent decades one of the most debated topics in higher education is the concept of shared governance. This concept is known by several names. Some of these names suggesting shared governance include 1) shared decision-making, 2) total quality management, 3) local decision making, and 4) participatory management. Perhaps part of the confusion about shared governance begins with the lack of agreement as to just what shared governance entails (Allen, 1991; Allen & Glickman, 1992; Lifton, 1992; Mims & Newbill, 1995). For the purposes of this paper we will define shared governance as a process that includes all institutional stakeholders making decisions affecting themselves and the institution where they work. We further define shared governance to include a responsibility for the outcomes of the decisions made. This second point is particularly important and may be the critical stumbling block to the institutionalizing of the processes of shared governance (Lifton, 1992; Wirth, 1991).

As one reviews the literature about shared governance one is struck with the impression that a position critical to shared governance is not popular. However, based on what is published, it is apparent that shared governance is an issue which should be carefully explored before any higher education institution attempts to adopt it. This paper is not intended to answer questions demonstrating the utility or futility of shared governance. That question will be answered only by those objectively assessing its impact and outcome within their institutional environment. This paper is intended to offer an alternative view of shared governance. A core aspect of analyzing any construct, method, or technique is to also illuminate associated negative as well as positive elements. If it is determined through objective analysis that the negatives are negligible, or can be effectively ameliorated, the construct, method, or technique may be determined to possess necessary legitimizing characteristics. If the negatives, found during the analysis, cannot be tolerated or otherwise dealt with, then the process should not be considered a viable option. If a process cannot be effectively managed it should be discarded.

The Elusive Nature of Shared Governance:

The definition offered herein relative to shared governance is the authors' abstraction of shared governance. This definition was developed from reviewing the literature. Shared governance is not easy to define. Allen (1991) called shared governance an elusive concept. He said it is difficult to grasp and more so to put into action. Allen saw confusion relative to a clear role definition needed for a shared governance process. Diluting, merging, and sharing of duties and processes assure participation will be difficult. Defining what should be done, which decisions need to be made, and which power position is primarily responsible, are situations identified as most difficult to resolve during the process of shared governance implementation.

Allen and Glickman (1992) reported on higher education institutions where shared governance was simply added to an existing system of governance. The result was that conflicting policies and procedures where operating simultaneously. This multi-directional environment results in confusion and even anger. They noted that, all too often, the shift to shared governance resulted in a total loss of priorities in the institution's decision making. Institutional players tended to focus on everything at once. Nothing constructive took place due to the confusion, lack of focus, or direction.

Mahon (1994) noted that all too often that institutional players expect more from shared governance than it could offer. Participants often over-anticipate the benefit, while at the same time, under-committing their own involvement in understanding what shared governance is. Shared governance is at best a process. Overnight success is not to be expected. Mahon believes many people involved in the process of adopting or using shared governance are convinced it will solve all their institutional frustrations. The end result of institutional involvement would not be a solution, but greater frustration. He also pointed out that shared governance is not a static concept. Proper implementation and use of a viable shared governance process requires constant revision and retraining of the participants.

Turning to the legal aspect of shared governance, Lifton (1992) stated that shared governance does cause serious problems when it is not clear who represents whom. For example, does the union (when present) represent the faculty, or do the faculty represent themselves, via collegial decision groups, as part of the shared governance model? With no existing clear definition of shared governance, according to Lifton, how can legal issues be satisfactorily solved within a framework of shared governance?

Mims and Newbill (1995) reported in situations where shared governance is the method of record there frequently still exists an undercurrent of strife between faculty and administration as to the roles each should play. Certainly, this is an indication that a clear definition of shared governance and it processes have not been agreed upon. Mims and Newbill also point out, that the only important reason for shared governance is enhanced student performance. These researchers also report that educational outcomes are almost never discussed in the debate surrounding shared governance. Such an observation further strengthens evidence that few institutional people understand the purpose of shared governance.

It seems difficult to visualize that something so basic as a definition of a process could be so troublesome. This appears to be the case with regard to shared governance. Many faculty and staff support the idea in which they see themselves as decision makers. Shared governance is just such a situation. Unfortunately, considering the power position representing any given institutional group with a voice in decision-making, and the actually working through the process where their voice is heard and considered among others, are two very different issues. Within the higher education collegial environment the parallel tracks of academic and administration mix and merge via the processes of shared governance. It is an uncomfortable alliance at best.

Barriers to the Implementation of Shared Governance:

Many have written about the barriers for an institution attempting to adopt a model of shared governance. Allen and Glickman (1992) discussed many of these barriers. They say no implementation can proceed until the definition of the model is developed and accepted by all institutional constituencies. Until the model is clearly defined, understood, and implemented in an acceptable form, the end result will be defeat due to confusion and anger. Allen and Glickman identify the major barrier to successful adoption of shared governance is, once institutional persons become players in the decision making process institutional constituencies tend to focus only on their respective agendas. The overall advancement of the institution based on goals and objectives is last in the subjectiveness of the shared governance process. The result is stalemate or gridlock.

Persons new to the idea shared governance tend to forget that their roles do not end with the development of a policy (Allen & Glickman, 1992). When one makes a decision and / or develops a policy there remains an obligation to see that the policy is properly implemented and subsequently measure the outcomes of said policy. This is the job of governing. Many faculty are not ready for this role.

Models of shared governance exhibit specific organizational characteristics. Those organizational characteristics are delineated into advisory roles and decision-making roles. It is not uncommon for advisory bodies to become frustrated due to role confusion, perceiving their role as one of decision-making (Allen & Glickman, 1992). Such confusion can lead to strife.

Examining some of the more practical problems with shared governance, Mahon (1994) pointed out that these participation types of governance are time consuming. Such necessarily large time commitments place additional burdens on faculty, taking away from their historically primary roles of instructor and researcher. Another practical problem of shared governance is one of stagnation. In order for decision-making groups to effectively and efficiently discharge their duties these governing groups first need to be stable. If these policy groups, however, become too stable, too confused about their role, too time consuming, or they work with too much latitude, they begin to represent themselves and those who lobby them. Therein the process is no longer participatory, but self-promoting, developing along narrow interests.

Another question to be addressed before any legitimate shared governance approach can even be considered, deals with legislative legitimacy. Lifton (1992) points out that state laws often limit the transfer of authority to shared governance participants. Particular areas of authority must remain with the Board of Trustees. Even when all stakeholders agree that shared governance is appropriate, full adoption may not be a legal possibility.

Simply posturing that one's institution employs shared governance does not make it a reality. Trust is a central issue and its absence can be a real barrier to successful implementation of a shared governance process. Lifton (1992) says that a requisite level of trust is very difficult to achieve. Flanigan (1994) demonstrated in a study of California community college administrators and faculty senate presidents that even in cases where shared governance was supposedly the method of governance, both CEOs and senate presidents believed there was still an environment of "we / they." Flanigan's study disclosed senate presidents distrusted central administration even when they were operationally under a shared governance model. This lack of trust severely limits effective functioning of the shared governance model. Flanigan suggested shared governance cannot be adopted until a high level of trust is reached among administration, faculty, staff, and students. Lifton reported that shared governance could not work when groups saw each other as adversaries. Goodlad (1991) supports Lifton explaining possible reasons why some faculty see others outside their own discipline as adversaries,

> With the increased size characteristic of universities, faculty members often feel remote from centers of administrative power....Many feel detached from their

> employing universities and even campus colleagues, deriving feelings of worth and professional satisfaction from discipline-oriented national and international associations_.Faculty members at all types of colleges and universities spend an enormous amount of time on institutional governance--from work on campus wide budget and faculty review committees to participation in a seemlyingly needless array of departmental task forces and other committees. The fact that there is so little reward for this component of the job helps to explain why the work is often unevenly distributed. (p. 110)

Holt (1990) explored resolution of conflicts in an environment of shared governance. His suggestions seem to define significant initial barriers to implementation. The key point Holt makes is that shared governance requires extreme structure. The level of structure he advocates (to prevent serious conflicts) requires enormous effort, commitment, time, and trust on the part of all parties. One wonders whether or not the rewards would be worth the required investment. One might easily conclude that the rewards were not worth the investment. In the short term, Mahon (1994) observed that shared governance never should be expected to be a "quick fix."

Another barrier to a successful implementation of the shared governance model lies in the area of communication (Lau, 1996; Lovas, Kanter, & Jackman, 1994). Unless an organization can effectively communicate the expectations, responsibilities, and the operating rules with all stakeholders, shared governance will fail. Communication sounds like a simple problem to address, but information can be held hostage, colored, altered, misused, etc. When those making decisions and giving advice are not kept informed of the outcomes of their actions problems quickly arise. Furthermore, even excluding communication within a shared governance process, decision-making groups must regularly communicate with their constituencies. Lovas, Kanter, and Jackson (1994) suggest the higher education institution perform a "communications audit" prior to implementing a shared governance process. If the communications of the institution are not effective the process is doomed.

Potentially Negative Outcomes in the Practice of Shared Governance:

Shared governance has been adopted into many educational environments. A considerable amount of words has been written critiquing the effectiveness of shared governance. Allen (1991) suggested that it is not uncommon for serious coordinating problems to arise within communications processes keeping faculty informed of decision outcomes. He also noted that administrators have a tendency to abandon the model in times when tough decisions must be made in a timely fashion. Allen and Glickman (1992) reported that some institutions struggle with the identification of leadership within the policy group: should leaders be appointed, elected, or should they volunteer for service. Considering the necessity of steady participation, leaders who volunteer make some sense to Allen and Glickman. However, not all institutional constituents are comfortable with such an inexact approach. Allen and Glickman confirm in their research that shared governance only works when there is a high level of participation from all groups. Such a requisite level of participation can be difficult to realize.

Responsiveness to real-world challenges to viability of the institution often call for decisive action. Several authors have noted the slowness and tediousness of the process that is central to successful shared governance. For example, Griffith (1993) chronicles a budgetary crisis that occurred in 1990 at the University of Maryland-College Park. While Griffith's article was penned to extol the virtues of shared governance in higher education, one is struck by the fact that correction of the shortfall in operating funds required over two years of discussions and debate in order to reach any final decision as to how the institution would handle the problem. In the end 27 degree programs, 7 departments, and one college were closed to produce budget savings. The initial problem began with a budget shortfall of $40 million from reduced state appropriations. By the time the shared governance process had run its course the closings had occurred. In the end only $6 million was saved. The author was quite pleased with the outcome. The question could be poised as to whether the shared governance process produced a workable solution in an effective time frame.

Lunsford (1993) also supports the findings that shared governance takes a great deal more time, more people, and considerable work. Lau (1996) makes the same observation. There is a real potential for friction among faculty and staff. Miller (1993) is another who affirms the slow nature of the process. Roberts and Dungan (1993) further show governance as a process taking a great deal of time from the participants. Wirth (1991) joins the chorus, saying shared governance is a difficult, lengthy, and frustrating process. She finds that forging a consensus among so many divergent institutional players is inherently complex.

Low levels of time efficiency and poor responsiveness inherent to the shared governance process is part and parcel to other identified problems. Trustees, boards, and regents are critical to installing a successful process of shared governance. Lunsford (1993) noted that unless senior-level leaders commit real support to the process of shared governance, the exercise is useless. The leadership style of those at the top in higher education administration determines real success of the model's usefulness (Lunsford). Shared governance, if it works to any successful degree, does so when senior leaders possess a collaborative leadership style. Higher education administrators with more traditional styles have difficulty effectively leading a shared governance process.

What Shared Governance Does Not Do:

As one reads the literature associated with shared governance, it is obvious taking a negative view of the process, as this paper does, is not popular. Even those papers identifying negative characteristics of shared governance attempt to put a positive face on their findings. One wonders just what faculty, staff, students, and administration are expecting from shared governance, or what they think is happening when using this governance model. We now focus attention to what shared governance specifically does not do.

Roberts and Dungan (1993) state plainly that shared governance does not create cohesion, cultural affinity, or any form of collegiality. If such traits are not already part of the institution's culture shared governance should not be expected to make them suddenly appear. Roberts and Dungan also point out that shared governance is not an animal that feeds and waters itself. They note that continuous and on-going training is required to make it work. Institutional players must learn to properly and appropriately use the process, the various concomitant roles, and engage proper expectations. Even in the best of circumstances there will be institutional turf struggles.

Wirth (1991) states that even though people may work together in a shared governance process model to decide or develop policy, often neglected is the responsibility ensuring the decision or policy results in the change intended. Another way to say this is, faculty often enjoy making a decision as administrators, but rarely enjoy the job of making those administrative decision meaningful.

It is fun, and sometimes heady, to be an "administrator" on the front end, but quite different on the back end where the real work is done. A good example is found in the research of Perley (1995). He describes the process of hiring a new president of a university. Perley records an apparent victory due to faculty forcing the search committee and administration to make the presidential search process totally open university community. What he fails to discuss is whether or not the president-elect was a good match for the goals and direction of the university. Did the university benefit in the long run from the strife that was developed? Assessing his report, one could argue that some decisions required of an institution are sensitive. Too much openness and discussion lead to delays, second-guessing, and unnecessary criticisms that are hurtful to the institution.

Nussbaum (1995) outlined the evolution and progress of shared governance in California community colleges. While Nussbaum did note positive outcomes accruing to the colleges, he pointed out that participants still saw overarching higher education issues from their organization's perspective. Turf wars remained quite common, trust was in short supply, and players still became frustrated with the process, finding it difficult to understand why other institutional collegiate groups did not see their position as the superior. Shared governance does not evoke Camelot.

Shared governance does not obviate basic facts of institutional life. One of these mentioned by Lau (1996), relate to negotiation questions involving jurisdictional boundaries. When these issues arise it can be difficult to resolve them. Difficulty arises from accountability. Higher education committees are not line supervisors. Such committees, like a search committee, are not usually accountable. Administrators, however, are accountable. It is not really realistic to "fire" a committee.

Shared governance does not eliminate the less comely tendencies of personnel. Power vacuums do form in shared governance models (Wirth, 1991). When such vacuums do form it is common, and administratively natural, to see persons or groups take advantage. It is natural for many using shared governance strive to further develop their self-esteem or gain recognition (Wirth, 1991). If it is extreme, the behavioral prostitution of the process seriously jeopardizes the viability of the governance. Others see this and loose faith in the process. This harms the essential participation.

At the very heart of the shared governance process is the idea of avoiding a zero sum game (Holt, 1990). Shared governance does not guarantee a better product. One wonders whether such a goal can really produce enough real winners. Quality can be maintained if everyone wins. Everyone at the institution does win when quality is achieved, but to say that quality is defined by no losers is idealistic and does not reflect real higher education institution administrative, collegial, or policy processes.

How do the Administrators View Shared Governance?

Lovas, Kanter, and Jackman (1994) surveyed 460 members of the Association of California Community College Administrators to obtain their impressions of shared governance. Shared governance processes are the model operating in the California Community College system. In the survey researchers received 80 positive comments and 295 negative comments. The summary of the negative comments are,

- the process is slow, tedious, time consuming, and wasteful;
- it takes so much time to implement that administration cannot meet its responsibilities;
- the process often results in chaos, confusion, and stalemate. Nothing gets done;
- shared governance increases the administrators responsibility, but weakens his / her authority;
- it's a myth, only good for self-serving agendas;
- it polarizes and is largely adversarial;
- it assigns too much power and control to the faculty; and,
- it puts front line and middle managers at a great disadvantage (Lovas, Kanter, & Jackman, 1994).

In a final summation the responding administrators point out that 'everyone is not a leader.' Shared governance assumes that everyone equally can take a leadership role as needed. This assumption is mistaken.

Spelling Disaster for Shared Governance:

Several issues have been identified which are important with regard to the success or failure in implementing shared governance. It is certainly worthwhile to consider these issues. One is first struck with the fragile nature of shared governance. An analogy one might draw is, shared governance is somewhat like a piece of rare porcelain. It is beautiful to look at. It can give the owner a sense of accomplishment. But, its practicality is severely limited.

Roberts and Dungan (1993) produced a list of porcelaneous type issues that can bring disaster to a shared governance process.

1. Participants in the shared governance process are very sensitive to authenticity. Authenticity in this case being defined as actual belief in and commitment to the process. If they sense authenticity is missing the process is doomed. Considering the comments of responding administrators to the survey by Lovas, Kanter, and Jackman (1994), one could assume a lack of authenticity might be real.

2. Communication sharing and networking must be exceptional. Inadequate or impaired communication splinters the groups into self-serving cliques. Such cliques defeat the purpose of shared governance, rendering it useless. Lau (1996) and Lovas, Kanter, and Jackman (1994) both highlight the import of good communication. Several of the authors examined as part of this paper made direct comments that could be interpreted as communication concerns. The question then becomes whether or not it is reasonable to assume medium-to-large institution communications at the level needed to operationalize true shared governance is really possible.

3. Expectations are usually very high. This is particularly true of the roles of the faculty, staff, and students. Frustrations and impatience are very likely to develop. Organizations of higher education not completely prepared to handle those implementation problems are in line for governance showdowns. The problems arises from the difference between participant's expectations and organizational reality.

4. Faculty are often intoxicated with this newfound inclusion in the decision making process. A result of this intoxication is a lack of focus on attainable goals. Everything for everyone cannot be solved at once. When this environment exists there is typically a concurrent state of mission drift occurring at the institution.

5. As impatience and frustration mount, lobbying and filibustering begin to be the norm for staking out positions. Very little institutional progress is made. In fact, the system of governance then becomes home to some of the worst aspects of any former method of centralized governance.

6. Players tend to forget, that shared governance, at its best, is about improving education. Its purpose is not solving the ills and social injustices of the world. Participants who expect such fantastic outcomes are an impediment.

Most of these problems are issues in which any form of higher education governance could find itself mired. Shared governance has a limited ability to extricate the governing effort from the mire of self-interest, unreal expectation, and role confusion. This limited ability stems in part, from the long response-time loop required for even the smallest decisions. Continuing this logic a step further, is a shared governance process really anything unique? Lifton (1992) suggests the shared governance model may be nothing new at all. Lifton's position is that successfully governed institutions have an established history and culture of administration / faculty / student collaboration anyway. Dr. M. Guffey (personal communication, August 3, 1997) characterized shared governance a "sop." Sop, in this context, would be defined as something given to the faculty and staff to appease them so as to facilitate the institution's business. If this characterization is accurate then shared governance is not much more than a model, cluttering the higher education administration landscape. Honest, educated, and effective adults committed to a fair governance process, could achieve it without all the layers of bureaucracy of the shared governance approach.

Summary:

Shared governance is in vogue. Many faculty see great promise in this form of collegial governance because faculty may have greater input into the process; at least in the abstract. Based on the previous discussion herein, that belief may be naive. Shared governance is not a panacea. It is a form of governance which may work far more effectively on paper than in actual practice. It is a paradigm that has not completely worked out the human side of the higher education enterprise.

Should an institution install this form of governance, the institution, faculty and administration, have an obligation to consider all the inherent pitfalls. This paper has attempted to suggest one road map for such an exploration. If this review of the literature does nothing more than outline the problems and errors made by other institutions it has served its purpose well.

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