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ABSTRACT

This paper, which focuses on shared governance in community colleges, is part of a series published by the Center for Community College Policy, designed to support state and local policymakers, as well as educational leaders who are interested in policy issues related to the two-year postsecondary sector. Shared governance, or "collegial decision making," entails distributing authority, power, and influence for academic decisions among campus constituencies. Campus constituencies may include faculty, students, administrators, staff, unions, faculty senate, and the board of trustees. Historically, community college governance flowed from the president at the top down through layers of other administrators and faculty. As community colleges are increasingly being expected to quickly deliver customer service and redesign curricula to meet community and industrial needs, shared governance will become more crucial. Presented in this document are the advantages and disadvantages of shared governance. The importance of establishing a clear definition of shared governance and how it fits into the college's mission is a prerequisite to designing appropriate training for faculty and staff. It is recommended that specific areas of action be outlined before decisions are made so that each constituent group is aware of the scope of its responsibilities and authority. (AF)

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SHARED GOVERNANCE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by Richard L. Alfred

INTRODUCTION

Shared governance is one of the most widely discussed and misunderstood topics in postsecondary education today. Lacking precise definition and often interpreted in ways that support special interests, it can have different meanings for different audiences.

Some view it as a system of self-government in which policies, procedures and decisionmaking involve the entire organization. Others see it as a process that defines the roles trustees, administrators, instructors and students should play in "shared responsibility" and "cooperative action" for operating institutions. And still others interpret it as a mandate for institutions to offer all personnel a seat at the decisionmaking table.

In one state, mandated shared governance has replaced participatory governance as the mode for decisionmaking. All constituencies have a right to collaborate in making decisions, in contrast to participatory systems in which constituencies have a right to comment, but not to vote.

Governance can be defined as the act of decisionmaking. In its simplest form, shared governance can be defined as "collegial decisionmaking" or the process for distributing authority, power and influence for academic decisions among campus constituencies. Campus constituencies may include, but are not limited to, the board of trustees, faculty, students, staff, administrators, the faculty senate and unions.

Three themes in this definition guide its application in community colleges:

- Current and historical approaches to organization and the impact of these approaches on decisionmaking
- Differential involvement in decisionmaking among staff, depending on their position in the institution
- A prevailing concern about the distribution of power and authority for decisionmaking among different parties. These themes will be used to examine the policy implications of shared governance on community college campuses.

Shared governance is an important issue for policymakers because it is one of several factors shaping how community colleges respond to state and local needs. Institutions can respond quickly or slowly depending on how they are organized to make decisions. Those that are committed to shared governance may not be able to respond as rapidly as those which are not because of the expectation for extensive consultation and shared responsibility that comes with collective decisionmaking. The issue is not one of responsiveness — all colleges will eventually respond to identified needs — but rather one of speed and flexibility. How quickly will they respond?

II Background

In their early period of development (1950 to 1965), community colleges were small but fast-growing organizations administered by leaders with seemingly unlimited authority reinforced by a board of trustees. Presidents made decisions with a small group of administrators and depended on an informal network to communicate the results of the decision process.

As institutions grew in size and complexity, a pyramid structure for governance evolved in which power flowed from the president at the top of the organization through layers of staff vice presidents, deans, directors, department heads and faculty. The allocation of resources in the college budget came to be the primary mechanism of control for many presidents. Faculty maintained primary responsibility for decisions on courses, curricula and matters that affected teaching and learning, whereas administrators maintained responsibility for decisions related to planning, coordination and allocation of resources.

The interests of faculty, administrators and trustees were different, each holding unique values and goals and representing distinct constituencies. The result was the beginning of conflict between faculty and administrators regarding their roles in decisionmaking. Issues were weighed in terms of their impact on group concerns, and the sheer mass of new staff in the institution made the availability of resources the critical factor in decisionmaking.

Tightening resources and increasing pressure for representation in decisionmaking changed the context for governance in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Community colleges that had assigned a strong administrative role to the president in their developmental years found themselves besieged by special interests. New actors entered the governance picture, including coordinating boards, legislative committees, legislators and the executive branch of government.

No issue generated more controversy in this period than the control of community colleges and who was to make decisions on specific issues. A sharp increase in state support was accompanied by state-level monitoring, auditing and policies that affected the programs and operations of most colleges.

At the same time, faculty and staff began to push for meaningful involvement in decisionmaking. Increasingly cognizant of the fact that collective bargaining could safeguard or improve working conditions, but could not guarantee involvement in strategic decisions, faculty began to establish alliances with influential groups to forge new approaches to governance. California Assembly Bill 1725 — legislation spurring a move from "participative" to "shared" governance in California community colleges — provides an excellent example of what collaboration can do to change the inner workings of campus governance.

The context for shared governance changed dramatically in the 1990s. A

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complex of forces has cascaded on community colleges and rendered traditional structures and systems obsolete:

- Students and constituencies outside of college walls have become more and more critical of the quality of service they receive, and expect something to be done about it.
- New competitors are fast at work reshaping the postsecondary education market by creating value for students in ways that surpass traditional colleges.
- Pressures for accountability and performance documentation have intensified as state and federal government agencies seek to control costs and improve student outcomes.
- Four-year colleges and universities are constantly setting new rules for transfer and student recruitment that threaten to alter existing relationships with community colleges.

These forces contribute to a phenomenon of compression that brings a different perspective to shared governance and calls upon community colleges to respond in unusual ways. While traditional colleges have tinkered with the structure of the organization, extending programs and services, and tried to catch up with technology, vanguard competitors have developed entirely new delivery systems, and program and service concepts.

Some proprietary colleges, for example, have brought new meaning to student intake by bringing the entire process to prospective students at home or work, determining financial assistance on the spot, and offering lifetime placement assistance and job guarantees following program completion.

Other competitors have taken note of changing needs and are moving to modularize instruction by putting courses and services on the Internet and implementing asynchronous learning networks. Using technology, learners can now commute by modem, 24 hours a day, without having to adhere to rigid schedules. In this environment, there is a need for speed, and current approaches to shared governance based on consultation and empowerment may not be able to keep pace.

III Perspectives on Shared Governance

Until recently, organizations of all kinds, including community colleges, determined priorities from inside. Now, community colleges must play a pivotal role in contributing to state and local economies and in helping citizens and communities adjust to social change. To accomplish this, they will need to organize differently around concepts such as *speed, customer service* and *design teams* which involve continuous assessment.

Most institutions find this difficult. While community colleges have changed significantly in response to the expressed needs of employers, lawmakers and other interest groups, faculty and staff cling to traditional notions of decisionmaking and program/service delivery. Change is a slow and time-consuming process that is embraced by some and resisted by others. It is in this context of pressures and counterpressures associated with change that shared governance in community colleges must be considered.

The following perspectives on shared governance are derived from literature describing the experience of faculty and staff in the nation's community colleges. A particular emphasis is placed on the experience of California community colleges as a result of mandated shared governance through Assembly Bill 1725 passed in 1988.

Advantages of Shared Governance

- Fosters a *sense of empowerment* as individuals gain the opportunity to participate in decisionmaking.
- Promotes greater *"buy-in" to decisions* by all parties associated with the ability to influence the outcome.
- Encourages staff to *accept responsibility for decisions*; once a decision is endorsed by empowered staff, they will be more likely to seek to protect what has been collectively created.
- Results in *improved morale and an improved college environment* as opportunities for greater involvement in decisionmaking can lead to the development of collegial relationships among trustees, administrators, faculty and staff.
- Increases the *breadth of understanding related to issues*; better decisions are made when a diversity of opinions are brought to the decision process and participants develop well-rounded perspectives on important issues.
- *Improves communication* by involving more people in the decision process; as participants report back to their constituents on issues addressed in governance, more people become aware of collegewide issues and decisions.
- Fosters *divergent points of view* as a range of opinions are brought forward on different issues.
- Improves the likelihood that the college will move forward in *responding to critical issues*; shared governance encourages compromise and helps to avert harmful stalemates among factions on important issues.

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DISADVANTAGES OF SHARED GOVERNANCE

- *Slows decisionmaking* because it is a difficult, lengthy and sometimes tedious process that is inherently more complex than simply issuing decisions in an authoritarian manner.
- *Hampers effective management* because it requires numerous iterations of the same information to achieve consensus among parties.
- *Limits efficiency* because it lengthens the time required to complete critical processes such as planning and assessment.
- *Diminishes the quality of decisions* by soliciting opinions from those who are not qualified to speak to the issues.
- *Slows progress in institutional development* because faculty are not available during certain periods in the calendar year.
- *Adds to the responsibility of administrators* while reducing their authority because they must serve as mentors to faculty and staff who have no previous experience in decisionmaking.
- Makes *teaching and learning a secondary responsibility* as some instructors become more interested and involved in decisionmaking than their instructional or course and curriculum assignments.
- *Takes administrators away from strategic responsibilities* such as implementing new programs and services.
- *Disguises the self-serving agendas and political maneuvering* of faculty and staff, which undermine true collegiality and effective decisionmaking.
- Has resulted in an *unfavorable amount of power*, control and advantage to faculty.
- Leads to *role confusion* in decisionmaking as administrators are bypassed or undermined, especially in relationship among faculty with whom they must work.
- Encourages *polarization and adversarial relations* among faculty, staff and administrators.

California is the only state with mandated shared governance. Therefore, it provides an excellent laboratory for analysis of related state-level issues. In all other states, governance systems are elective, that is, they are within the purview of institutions to determine.

A unique application of shared governance that carries both advantages and disadvantages is collective bargaining. When management and unions negotiate to determine salary and working conditions, they are carrying out a limited form of shared governance, particularly in mutual gains bargaining. The decisionmaking context is structured, and power and influence are distributed among parties performing

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specific roles. Unions create governance problems by tying decisionmaking to protocols which may favor faculty and staff instead of students. They facilitate shared governance by adding structure to the decision context and ensuring that a broad range of views are heard.

IV Policy Implications

Is shared governance a help or a hindrance for community colleges in an environment of changing student needs, aggressive competitors, advancing technology and divided opinion on campuses? A brief look at some of the policy implications of shared governance might help policymakers understand when it is effectively and ineffectively used.

- **Time and efficiency.** Shared governance is a difficult, lengthy and time-consuming process. Administrators must become teachers, exercising great patience and giving participants time to discover and develop. Individuals and groups who formerly did not share in decisionmaking must spend time and energy learning new skills and knowledge and acquire a view or perspective broader than their department. Teaching and service may become secondary priorities as individuals devote more time to shared governance.

  To improve efficiency in decision-making, leaders and policymakers may want to consider fast-track procedures for certain types of decisions or to establish a covenant with faculty and staff that enables decisions to be made without consultation in certain circumstances. Institutions must move quickly in response to changing conditions while honoring tradition. A dualistic or "two-track" approach to decision-making may be a reality that institutions involved in shared governance need to embrace.

- **Quality of decisions.** It is unclear as to whether the quality of decisions (as defined by outcomes and cost) is improved or diminished under shared governance. On the one hand, better decisions might result from a range of opinions and perspectives brought to bear on a specific issue. On the other hand, parties holding divergent opinions may compromise the quality of a decision by settling for an outcome that satisfies everyone, but does little to advance the institution. Decisionmaking in any system of governance must move an institution forward in pursuit of important initiatives.

  When divergent interests collide, it may be necessary to employ an "audit process" that systematically examines the outcomes and costs of decisions and the extent to which they have advanced the institution on a defined path. This information may help leaders and policymakers understand the short- and long-term effects of shared governance on institutions.

- **Motivation and commitment.** Does staff commitment and morale improve under shared governance? Do faculty and staff perform better? The answers to these questions are not known, but people seem to invest more of themselves in organizations that provide opportunities for involvement in decisionmaking. The experience of corporations that have gone through reengineering and adopted team approaches to management provides ample evidence of positive outcomes that can be obtained through involvement. Countering this effect, however, are staff descriptions of frustration and conflict associated with contentious parties in decisionmaking, slow progress and negligible gains in performance.

Leaders and policymakers interested in shared governance should consider the effect of different approaches on faculty and staff. An important question to ask would be: "Under what conditions does involvement seem to work and not work in decisionmaking?"

- **Organizational effectiveness.** Speed and efficiency are critical concepts for community colleges facing formidable competitors, students with changing needs and challenges to existing boundaries. Institutions that move slowly or fail to respond to change will be left behind. Therefore, a critical issue that leaders and policymakers need to consider is the impact of shared governance on organizational effectiveness. Does faculty and staff involvement in decisionmaking help the institution respond to changes in the market? Does it encourage innovation in programs, services and delivery systems? Does it improve student learning outcomes? The relationship between shared governance and organizational performance is perhaps the single most important issue in shared governance requiring consideration by policymakers.

V. KEY QUESTIONS

Policymakers should consider the following questions when approaching shared governance:

1. What is shared governance? Is it shared responsibility? Shared authority? Shared power? Total involvement in decisions? A place for all groups at the bargaining table?
2. What is the difference between concepts such as "responsibility," "authority," "power," "accountability" and "involvement in decisionmaking" in shared governance?
3. What groups and individuals are responsible and accountable for what decisions in shared governance?
4. What roles do different groups — the board of trustees, faculty, administrators, classified staff and students — play in shared governance?
5. Who really needs to be involved in decisions? Why?
6. What qualifies an individual to participate in decisionmaking?
7. What institutional issues should and should not be addressed through shared governance?
8. What kinds of organizational structures, leadership and management are necessary in community colleges to effectively implement shared governance?
9. What new channels, modes and styles of communicating are needed to maintain a sense of "involvement" in shared governance?
10. What approaches to decisionmaking make sense for community colleges in an increasingly decentralized, collaborative, technological environment?
11. Are the results of decisions made under shared governance better? Do colleges perform better? Do student outcomes improve?
12. Are the costs of decisions made under shared governance justifiable?

VI. Conclusion

Shared governance is a good concept in the abstract, but a clear definition of its parameters, a clear institutional direction and leadership training for faculty and staff are required if it is to be implemented with positive results. If parties are unclear about who is doing what and who has responsibility and authority for the decisions that must be made within a shared governance framework, decisionmaking can become a nightmare.

The challenge of shared governance is for different parties to identify specific areas of responsibility before decisions are made and action taken. To guide the development of an effective college, administrators must work collaboratively with faculty, staff, senates and unions in an environment where the scope of responsibility and authority of each constituent group is clearly understood.

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