Comparison of Historically Non-Democratic Nationality Faculty in Democratic
Decision-Making in US Higher Education Institutions

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<u>Abstract</u>

American colleges and universities rely on a system of shared governance that includes the voluntary involvement of faculty to assist in the decision-making process. With a culture of democratic involvement and an expectation to participate in the democratic process generally, American citizens are accustomed to this type of involvement, regardless of whether or not they choose to participate. For citizens of other countries, however, this can be completely contrary to their conceptions of community involvement. In some countries, simply, there is no individual involvement in determining societal expectations, behaviors, or responses. Therefore, this study was designed to explore how citizens of those countries who have come to join US college and university faculty governance bodies exercise their right to involvement. Drawing on a sample of faculty who were socialized and originally from Mainland China, a survey of nearly 100 faculty was completed. Findings suggest that these faculty take their responsibilities on a faculty governance unit seriously and see their role as one of importance and based on their responsibility to the institution. The resulting conclusion of the study was that civic responsibility of immigrant groups, particularly those from non-democratic societies, can be polarized between the very involved and committed to those who are completely disengaged.

American higher education has come to rely on a system of shared governance for institutional decision-making. Although these structures often do not add substantively to the outcome of what have been termed big decisions (Eckel, 1999), they have been noted to be important instruments for building a positive workplace culture, ensuring high morale, and the resultant benefits of such activities including better retention (Evans, 1999). A variety of structures have evolved during the past 40 years to allow for inclusive decision-making, including community governance conceptualizations where faculty, staff, administrators, and students are all placed on an equal playing field to have access to decision-making. The primary model, however, is of governance where authority and power are shared among faculty members and administrators (Miller, 2003). The success of this type of structure is often predicated on high levels of trust (Pope, 2004), but is also reliant on faculty members voluntarily involving themselves in the work of the institution and their belief that a democratic workplace is something to be valued and is important to the mission of contemporary higher education (Miller, 2003).

The ideals of a democratic community include a belief that it is the right and obligation of an individual, in this case an individual faculty member, to become involved in institutional self-oversight, priority setting, and decision-making. This belief is often manifest through either individual commitment to involvement on campus or through participation in a democratically elected self-governing body, such as a faculty senate (Benton, 1997). These governing bodies have been wrought with problems during the past two decades, being the outlet for radicalism, apathy and disinterest, manipulation, and frivolity. The result has generally been twofold: first,

an increasing higher education workplace has been the battleground for legal

challenges over such topics as the property rights of tenure and the spectrum of

academic freedom, state and federal law compliance, and employment law. The

second result has been the consistent re-emergence of collective bargaining

agreements, often the consequence of the disconnect between administrative

ambitions, institutional mission, and the defined work agreements of faculty.

The consequence for shared governance of these two trends is the struggle to

enlist the most qualified and respectable faculty in shared governance activities. In

many instances the desire to enlist faculty support has resulted in either the continual

reliance on the same members who repeatedly indicate an interest in participating

(termed "old timers" by Miller, 2003) and those of different backgrounds who have a

less clearly defined notion of what to expect. This second group includes a number of

faculty members with international backgrounds. These faculty members who are

immigrants or non-citizens comprise approximately 2%-5% of all faculty in US

colleges and universities, a percentage that has doubled during the past 25 years.

Anecdotal evidence suggests, at best, that many of these faculty members arrive in

their faculty roles with a strong sense of academic expertise, but lack some of the

societal and culture knowledge necessary for their advancement or integration to

campus (Chung, personal communication, 2004).

An additional dimension to this challenge for international faculty is that

many come from countries where there is no expectation to take part in a democratic

society. Their arrival on college campuses in the US doubly challenges them,

expecting that they can adjust to the culture of the academic enterprise and adjust to

the democratic nature of American higher education. The problem addressed in the current study, then, is what do international faculty from non-democratic countries expect and why do they participate in shared governance activities in higher education.

Results of the study have relevance and importance to a variety of constituents, including those working in academic affairs who are looking for strategies to help faculty be successful in their careers. Those working in faculty development also will have an interest in these findings, as the results can impact activities such as new faculty orientation. And perhaps most importantly, the findings of the study will impact those working in shared governance in higher education in the identification of key cultural differences that might inhibit participation, or conversely, suggest a new strata of faculty who might participate more fully in shared governance activities.

Background of the Study

There is little literature, either research based or anecdotal, that describes the situation that international faculty find themselves in. There are a variety of reports that highlight the disconnect between cultures and the trouble those in the academy can have in adapting to those cultures (Thurnstrom, 1997), but the lack of a clearly defined conversation about international faculty results in a background divided into two broad categories: challenges faculty members face, including international faculty, and the state of shared governance in higher education.

Faculty Challenges

Higher education institutions are generally challenged by a variety of forces that impinge on their freedom and direction. A number of allegations have suggested that higher education has in fact been compromised by its commercialization and resulting greed (Aronowitz, 2000). A major part of this debate focuses on what higher education values, with the common denominator generally being viewed as activities and products that enhance the prestige and financial well-being of an institution. Although this thinking may be coached by administrative support networks, the majority of this work takes place among faculty members, with the depiction broadly being that of faculty who engage in research for commercially viable products or with great patent income potential being encouraged, while more altruistic and non-financially attractive lines of inquiry (and those who undertake them) being discouraged.

The challenge to the current faculty body is to not only provide excellence in instruction and to provide an acceptable level or body of service to the profession and institution, but to engage in academic exercises that promote the university in some form (financial, prestige, etc.). Although this is most exacerbated in the land grant or research focused university, there have been similar echoes in other segments of the higher education industry. Nearly 20 years ago Laabs (1987) argued that the permeation of doctoral degrees in community colleges, for example, promotes an attitude and appreciation for research and graduate instruction rather than excellence in undergraduate (and remedial) education. In essence, by awarding greater pay to community college faculty for completing graduate coursework, these same faculty

members are encouraged to pursue activities inconsistent with the historical tradition of community college education.

The financial concern of higher education is also represented in the systems of compensation that are used to reward certain faculty disciplines. In many institutions there is both within discipline compression, meaning that new faculty members are hired at a salary level that is close to that of senior faculty, and across discipline disparity (eg, faculty in engineering or business make substantially higher salaries than those faculty in the humanities, social sciences, and education). The rationale is generally that market-based demands dictate salary requirements, and therein lies the support for higher education as an industry to be seen as a financially motivated rather than societal institution.

Faculty from other countries hired into US colleges and universities are typically recruited within higher paying disciplines and are often recruited with attention to research ability rather than teaching potential, although this may be difficult to document in a generalizable way (Chung, 2004). A review of several of public land grant universities information available through the internet suggests a majority of international faculty hired in the areas of medicine, business, engineering, and computer science, with far fewer in the lower paying fields of education, social sciences, and humanities.

This means that international faculty bring some unique challenges to their experience in US higher education. They may be the victim of hostility related to salary inequity, they may see unique pressures to be productive in financial terms with their research, and they may have less regard for teaching, recognizing the value

of scholarship over teaching. Although these may be generalizations, they do suggest that international faculty do indeed have a unique and under-studied presence in American higher education.

Contemporary Shared Governance

Shared governance in higher education has been studied greatly during the past 40 years from a variety of perspectives. Views of shared governance have focused on ideal structures (McCormack, 1995), trust between faculty and administration (Pope, 2004), in the community college setting (Benton, 1997), topics considered (Armstrong, 1999), and the impact these structures have on decision making outcomes (Eckel, 1999). The broad result is that shared governance has not worked in a method suggesting a clear line of checks and balances (Birnbaum, 1991), but that it does have perceived and subsequently real value in the decision-making process (Evans, 1999).

Shared governance has often been tied to responding to the negative activities associated with trustees or senior administrators. Such was the case at the University of Arkansas in 2003, when faculty were galvanized over the trustees decision to allow the letter grade of "D" to transfer as a acceptable coursework. Similarly, shared governance activism led to a no confidence vote at Baylor University over perceived presidential mismanagement, and similarly, faculty moved to create greater protection from perceived mismanagement by forming bargaining agreements at institutions such as the University of Akron and Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Shared governance has also been seen as a positive strategy for allowing greater access to the decision-making process. Based loosely on the ideals of human

resource theory, faculty, staff, and even students can have input into the decision process and that input creates greater acceptance, improves morale and retention, and increases productivity. These environments are less likely to be noted in the popular press, but have been conceptually highlighted as the example of small college decision making (Birnbaum, 1991).

There has been some disagreement over the idea that involvement in shared governance can be a training ground for future administrative posts or to enhance career possibilities for a staff or faculty member. Trow (1990) firmly argued against the idea, noting that faculty responded to challenges to their value system by holding administrators accountable. Gilmour (1991) and Miller (2004) suggest a somewhat different conception, alluding to the possibility that faculty and staff members can learn a great deal about campus issues, decision-making processes, how to work with a variety of constituents, etc., and thus position themselves better for future career opportunities.

The conceptualization behind this study also suggests a fourth rationale for shared governance that has been mentioned rarely in the literature: motivation through civic responsibility. Frequent writings on the ideals of democracy depend on the individual to be involved because it is the duty of each citizen. There are few suggestions that this is the case within higher education, with the exception of some faculty who admit that it is their duty to take a turn serving on university wide committees (Evans, 1999). The conception is somewhat more pronounced, however, among students who choose to be engaged and who seek elected positions, although

there is no clear identification as to whether personal ambition and civic duty truly

coincide (Miles, 1997).

As the number of international faculty in US higher education grows, there

needs to be a better understanding of what motivates them and what potential exists to

incorporate them better into the decision making process. Additionally, as the variety

of cultures represented grows on campus, through internet exposure and the growing

global presence of other campuses, shared governance, as a democratic ideal needs to

be explored and examined from the perspective of potentially furthering democracy

as a social tool.

Research Methods

As an exploratory study of international faculty who participate in formal

institutional governance activities, previous research on faculty participation in

governance was used a template to understand this population. The National Data

Base on Faculty Involvement in Governance (NDBFIG) survey instruments were

collapsed into one instrument. The NDBFIG surveys were developed and

administered between 1994 and 2002 mostly from the University of Alabama, and

involved over 3,000 faculty and administrators. The instruments consistently had

reliability indices above .60 and had been refined numerous times to ensure face

validity. A description of the survey development process, and those measures used

to ensure its reliability, can be found in Miller's (2003) summary of the project.

Selected for this study were three specific areas that can provide an important

groundwork for the further study of shared governance and the role of international

faculty: motivation to be involved (12 items), skills needed for involvement (11

items), and general perceptions of governance (19 items). In all, the survey consisted

of 42 questions that were all responded to on a Likert-type scale, with 1=Strongly

Disagree progressing to 3=no agreement or disagreement, and 5=Strongly Agree.

The survey was administered to a purposive sample of 200 mainland Chinese

faculty who were working in tenured or tenure-track faculty positions in the winter of

2004-2005. The sample was developed using a snowballing technique where

individual faculty senates were contacted and asked to nominate someone who

currently or in the recent past (within the past 5 years) served on the faculty senate

who met the criteria of being an immigrant (or at some phase of immigration and

naturalization) from China. Only four year institutions were included in the study,

although there was a broad range of types of institutions, ranging from regional state

colleges to large land grant institutions. Both public and private colleges and

universities were included in developing the sample.

Only faculty members who indicated that they did indeed come from

mainland China were included in the study. These individuals were generally raised

and acculturated in a Communist environment that was not typically receptive to

democratic ideals, values, or activities. Therefore, these faculty members could be

hypothesized to have a predisposition not to be involved in democratic activities.

This was part of the main conceptualization of the study and has implications for a

variety of faculty development programs, academic administrators, and institutional

culture.

The sample was mailed a paper-and –pencil version of the survey, although were provided an email address to request an electronic version of the survey. Three follow-up emails and letters were sent to non-respondents.

Findings

A total 143 surveys were returned for use in analysis during the four weeks following the initial survey distribution. This number of responses represented a 71% response rate. An analysis of surveys based on time of receipt showed no substantial differences in response pattern.

Respondents were first asked to rate their agreement with a number of statements representing general perceptions about faculty involvement in governance. Participating faculty were asked to rate their level of agreement with each perception on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, with 1=Strongly Disagree, 3=Neither Disagree or Agree, progressing to 5=Strongly Agree.

The mean rating for the Chinese faculty that was the highest was for the perception of the "governance body members and academic administrators meet regularly" (mean 4.40; see Table 1). This was followed by the 4.18 mean rating of "communication is good between the governance body and academic administrators," and "it is difficult to get people to serve on governance body standing and/or ad hoc committees" (mean 4.12). Respondents agreed least with "management information is readily provided to the governance body concerning issues it considers" (mean 3.26), "communication is good between the governance body and the Board of Trustees" (mean 3.45), and "we have no difficulty getting a quorum at governance body meetings" (mean 3.49).

Although not the intention of the current study, data from the NDBFIG project are also provided in Table 1 to illustrate possible areas of different thinking between faculty who from historically non-democratic countries and those from typically the United States. There were several areas with minimal differences. Both groups rated "faculty members are not adequately rewarded for their participation in the governance process" nearly equally (4.00 for the Chinese faculty, 4.01 for the US faculty), "we have no difficulty getting a quorum at governance body meetings" (3.49 for Chinese faculty and 3.48 for US faculty), and "it is difficult to get people to serve on governance body standing and/or ad hoc committees" (4.12 for Chinese faculty, 4.09 for US faculty). Conversely, the biggest differences were seen in the ratings of the perceptions: "governance body members and academic administrators meet regularly" (4.40 for Chinese faculty, 3.82 for US faculty), "the governance body attracts the most capable people as members" (3.81 for Chinese faculty and 3.38 for US faculty), and "our governance body is not well represented on committees making decision on policy, planning, and allocation of resources" (3.67 for Chinese faculty, 4.08 for US faculty).

Participants were then asked to rate their agreement that certain identified skills were needed to effectively participate in faculty governance. As shown in Table 2, Chinese faculty identified organizational ability as the most important (mean 4.80), followed by having a range of interests (mean 4.30) and an ability for problem analysis (mean 4.22). Table 2 also provides a listings of mean ratings of these same items taken from the NDBFIG project that included a sample of nearly 200 US faculty members, who indicated oral communication skills as the most important skill

needed (mean 4.26) followed by leadership ability (mean 4.10), and organizational ability (mean 4.06).

The third section of the survey provided an opportunity for faculty to identify their motivation for being involved in shared governance activities. As shown in Table 3, Chinese faculty agreed most strongly with a sense of responsibility (mean 4.61) as their motivation for involvement. This was followed with the importance of decision-making (mean 4.44) and being asked to serve or be involved (mean 4.20). The mean ratings of US faculty were also included in Table 3, and the primary difference is that most agreed upon rating for US faculty was that involvement results in empowerment (mean 4.58). Chinese faculty were least involved for self-interest (mean 3.0, US faculty mean 3.02), for a communal atmosphere (mean 3.08, US faculty 3.61), and in a quest for knowledge (mean 3.47, US faculty 3.47).

Discussion

Shared governance in higher education has taken on an increasingly human resource function, being used to develop consensus among faculty and unity in thinking about institutional strategies. As a body designed to work with administrators, some within elected governance bodies question the value of involvement and question the reward structure available for involvement. The result in many institutions is trouble getting quorums to meetings, addressing trivial issues in the body, and a greater concern for procedures than content. In some institutions, such as the University of Arkansas, there are even problems getting faculty to run in elections and to serve on elected bodies (Task Force for Improving Governance, 2006). The growing number of faculty from different countries provides a possible

pool of faculty to participate, and the current study was designed in part to see how they perceive the governance process and their involvement. Additionally, with many faculty coming to the US from China, there is an interest in examining how those with non-democratic backgrounds interact within the framework of a democratically elected self-governance body.

The high response rate of 71% suggests at least some strong interest in the subject on the part of the Chinese faculty identified for the study. Perhaps consistent with the results of the study, these faculty members might have seen participation in the survey as more of an obligation rather than a voluntary activity. Indeed, the study findings suggest that even though these faculty representatives did not grow up participating in a democratic society, they took their responsibility quite seriously. Also, they were, as a group, less focused on personal ambition and using the senate or elected body for some specific purpose, but rather were seen as default participants, those who were asked to serve and did so. This suggests the possibility of a polarized immigrant groups, ranging from the non-involved or disengaged to the very highly involved, and provides the opportunity for more in-depth study and a conversation about how faculty from diverse perspectives and cultures influence and participate in academic democracy.

Finally, participation by diverse groups of faculty has the potential to impact the process and self-identity of senates or other elected bodies. In a sense, the future of faculty senates and elected governance bodies is at a tipping point between relying on existing pools of faculty labor that may increasingly use senates as career building, and between a more traditional view of senates as focused on the welfare of the

campus. The extent that faculty members such as the Chinese studied in here are involved can shape the future of these bodies and even the continued existence of an academic democracy.

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Table 1.
Perceptions of Faculty Governance

Characteristic	Chinese Faculty N=143	National Average n=2,491
Governance body adequately represents the faculty point of view	3.96	4.30
Governance body practices adhere to the guidelines set forth in its constitution and bylaws	4.11	4.20
It is difficult to get people to serve on governance body standing and/or ad hoc committees	4.12	4.09
Our governance body is not well represented on committees making decision on policy, planning, and allocation of resources	3.67	4.08
Faculty members are not adequately rewarded for their participation in the governance process	4.00	4.01
The governance body operate efficiently	3.71	4.00
The governance body's operating budget is adequate	3.88	4.00
Communication is good between the governance body and academic administrators	4.18	3.90
Governance body members and academic administrators meet regularly	4.40	3.82
The governance body does not have sufficient information on which to base its decisions	3.96	3.69

(table continues)

Table 1, continued
Perceptions of Faculty Governance

Characteristic	Chinese Faculty N=143	National Average n=2,491
Communication is good between the governance body and the Board of Trustees	3.45	3.62
The governance body is involved in important decisions about the way the institution is run	3.50	3.55
Academic administrators and governance body expectations regarding the governance body's role are the same	3.60	3.50
We have no difficulty getting a quorum at governance body meetings	3.49	3.48
The governance body attracts the most capable people as members	3.81	3.38
Management information is readily provided to the governance body concerning issues it considers	3.26	3.38
Our governance body leaders are not well prepared to assume their positions	3.50	3.28
The issues considered by our governance body are not important	3.50	3.25

Table 2.
Skills Needed to Effectively Participate in Faculty Governance

Characteristic	Chinese Faculty N=143	National Average n=181
Oral communication	4.06	4.26
Leadership	3.74	4.10
Organizational ability	4.80	4.06
Stress tolerance	3.37	4.00
Decisiveness	3.50	3.91
Written communication	4.10	3.82
Problem analysis	4.22	3.80
Judgment	3.99	3.66
Range of interests	4.30	3.48
Educational values	3.55	3.40
Sensitivity	3.54	3.39

Table 3.
Motivation for Involvement in Faculty Governance

Characteristic	Chinese Faculty N=143	National Average n=2,491
Empowerment	3.50	4.58
Sense of responsibility	4.61	4.33
Importance of decision-making	4.44	4.18
Asked to serve/be involved	4.20	4.16
Sense of professionalism	4.15	4.01
Sense of ownership	3.88	3.91
Environment on the campus	3.55	3.74
Relationship with administration	3.86	3.62
Communal atmosphere	3.08	3.61
Attitude toward students	3.50	3.42
Quest for knowledge	3.47	3.29
Self-interest	3.00	3.02