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Shared Governance and Systems Theory: A Mixed Methods Study of Faculty Perceptions and Ideas

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ABSTRACT

At a time when higher education faces serious existential challenges, it is important for stakeholders in higher education to come together to make important decisions that are thoughtful and internally legitimate. Shared governance, a concept that is widely touted yet wildly varied in implementation, is the best path forward for decision makers. In an effort to better understand shared governance and how it might best be practiced, this mixed-methods study uses data from faculty at one university to develop a model and a specific set of recommendations for shared governance reform. Viewed through the lens of systems theory, data analysis leads to a model that considers cultural and structural changes for shared governance that are cyclical and systemic.

Keywords: shared governance, faculty governance, structure, communication, recognition, trust, transparency

Leaders of institutions of higher education have a lot to consider when making decisions that impact operations and the institutional environment. Along the way, they must reflect on and consider who should be involved in the decision-making

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process and if the balance of power proportionately reflects the investment of the stakeholders and their responsibility to implement change. That is the essence of shared governance. More formally, shared governance can be defined as the collective and mutual oversight of university operations partaken equally by faculty and administrators (Bahls 2014; Cramer 2017; Gerber 2014; Johnston, 2003; LaForge 2020).

That definition notwithstanding, the concept of shared governance and all it encompasses remains fuzzy. Despite much research and writing about best practices in shared governance, the specific ways that university personnel define, interpret, and enact shared governance are often highly individualized and contextualized. And, arguably, shared governance has become more scrutinized amidst high profile events in recent years. For example, emergency operational and financial changes, such as those in response to COVID-19, serve as an example where shared governance is challenged. Institutions quickly convened health and safety experts to determine operating protocols, quotas for gatherings and communal spaces, and policies for campus interactions (Crapo, 2021; Ramlo, 2021). However, the speed with which the administration maneuvered to redefine the higher education experience out of necessity raised new questions hitting at the most core concerns of the shared governance argument: who is charged with oversight for the college environment? When decisions need to be made in haste, especially in times of crisis, should the balance of power be altered, and if so, when is the chance to revisit the decision made urgently to ensure balance over time?

The ways in which different institutional stakeholders are engaged in the various decision-making processes can be examined through many relevant topics, including but not limited to: academic freedom, free speech, tenure and promotion, and classroom and curriculum content (Garcia, 2020; Muhsin et al., 2019). The involvement of faculty and the representation of faculty voice in decisions such as these represents a critical institutional stake within the shared governance construct. It is, therefore, important to have a comprehensive understanding of the role of shared governance to influence policies, procedures, and the process of institutional decision making to ensure equal balance of power and stakeholder engagement over periods of time. In an effort to better understand shared governance and how it might best be practiced, this study uses data from faculty to develop a specific set of recommendations for shared governance reform.

The research questions guiding this study are:
1. What is shared governance as understood through relevant literature and practice?
2. What are current faculty perceptions of shared governance?
3. What are current faculty ideas for improved shared governance?

This article is organized into five sections. First, a review of the literature takes the reader through a summary of the history of shared governance to current and future topics related to shared governance. Then, the theoretical framework and the design of the study are explained. After that, the findings are presented in three parts: faculty perceptions, faculty ideas, and specific recommendations for improved shared governance. Finally, the discussion section relates the findings back to systems

theory, the theoretical framework, and makes clear that improving shared governance is about improving the culture and structures of an institution.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When distilled down to its simplest form, shared governance is the balance of power between university faculty and university administration (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2015; Bahls, 2014; Cramer, 2017; DeCesare, 2020; Eckel, 2000; Gerber, 2014; Honu, 2018). At the core of shared governance, the distinction between faculty and administration is as rudimentary as *education* and *operations*. Faculty are charged with bearing the expertise in their disciplines, creating new knowledge in their fields, and discerning what knowledge students need to successfully acquire and apply the curriculum beyond the classroom. In many cases, faculty are considered the responsible party for education inside classrooms, labs, and other inquiry-based experiences while administrators oversee many of the components to support functions outside of the classroom setting: maintenance of the physical spaces, programs, and offerings that contribute to the general preparedness of the student body (Garcia, 2020; Muhsin et al., 2019). In comparison, administrators are responsible for overall institutional management: ensuring financial solvency, institutional advancement, stewarding the institution's physical and human resources, and ensuring the institutional mission is carried out (Birnbaum, 1988). Yet, these responsibilities are not exclusive; shared governance is a sort of checks and balances approach to decision making in higher education.

While conceptually simple, the practice of shared governance is incredibly more granular and complex. Shared governance often is considered only in relation to the decision-making process when dealing with a large university issue. However, the specific steps include many varied and specific components, are vested with different stakeholders, and would have significant impact on specific university operations. To exemplify this complexity, imagine that student retention is the large university issue; a vast, overarching concern that matters to all professionals at an institution. However, some of the possible outcomes of a shared governance process might consider highly specific and individualized responses and only have direct importance to certain professionals at the institution.

To best understand the practice of shared governance, this review of relevant literature begins by looking at the history of shared governance followed by the why and how of shared governance before concluding with a look at future issues.

A History of Shared Governance

With the founding of Harvard in 1636, the nation embarked upon its efforts to educate its citizenry beyond secondary education. American postsecondary institutions during the colonial era were the poor distant cousins of those in England who drew upon both the German research and Oxbridge residential models to influence their own structures at the time of their founding (Bess & Webster, 1999; Dorn, 2017 Gerber, 2014; Lucas, 2006; Thelin, 2011). Similarly, many early American institutions began with very few faculty who held higher degrees until early in the 19th century where

there was a growing number of faculty with specialty areas and doctoral degrees (Gerber, 2014). Conversely, Dorn (2017) noted that some institutions, like Bowdoin University in Maine, were founded with less focus on a particular degree or field but rather a "peculiar obligation to promote the common good" (p. 17). By the early 1900s, six universities enrolled more than 5,000 students, and three employed more than 500 instructional staff (Dorn, 2017).

As the number of American postsecondary institutions increased, so did the desire for faculty with specialized credentials. The Ph.D. was becoming an increasingly popular attainment for both students and professors. One's status in the academic community was measured by the type of degree held. With each additional degree, the faculty further proved their expertise in their field and in the classroom. While the number of Ph.D.'s grew and as the academy became more professionalized, the battle cry for academic freedom rang out loud in colleges and universities from coast to coast. "A growing determination among leading academics to define and defend the principle of academic freedom for all faculty in a way that would cross disciplinary boundaries led to the formation of the AAUP in 1915" (Gerber, 2014, p. 6). The call for academic freedom only intensified, and with the founding of AAUP, faculty believed that there was now a defender in their corner.

In the foundational years of governance in higher education, faculty were responsible for matters that dealt with curriculum development and classroom issues. Honu (2018) posited that this role would eventually expand to include working to make decisions on policy development, planning events for the institution, budgeting, and hiring and evaluating administrators. Gerber (2014) noted a push for more faculty governance in the 1920s. However, governing boards were reluctant to allow faculty members a larger stake in governing. Boards feared that increased faculty governance would detract from their main roles in teaching and research. This dynamic continued with very few changes for 40 more years until the 1960s.

In 1966, a joint statement was released by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the AAUP to "officially welcome the faculty's role in shared governance beyond teaching and the curriculum" (Honu, 2018, p. 3). According to the AAUP, the joint statement was created and shared as an ethos statement for administrators, faculty, and governing boards to guide their respective institutions (2015). The AAUP designed the statement to offer overarching guidance related to the importance of shared governance and specific considerations for implementation at individual institutions (Morphew, 1999).

Through the AAUP statement, shared governance is named as an important issue for academia that requires collective understanding. Furthermore, per the statement, shared governance is necessary to respond to changing funding models, to ensure institutional welfare particularly in times of personnel changes, and an overarching desire for collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to solve educational problems.

Moving into the latter half of the twentieth century, institutions of higher education drifted towards a more corporate-like model in the running of the university (Gerber, 2014). Even the AGB, one of the organizations that coauthored the landmark AAUP statement on shared governance, made a call for "a more corporate model of

management in which a college or university's chief executive officer must resist academia's insatiable appetite for the kind of excessive consultation that can bring an institution to a standstill" (Gerber, 2014, p. 22). This corporatization is referenced and theorized in a number of different ways, including *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2009) and the neoliberalization of higher education (Giroux, 2014; Winslow, 2015). Rhoades (2003) argued that academic capitalism has completely changed how institutions operate by changing their management, production, and cultural system. These three areas of change have also caused increased demand for *managerial professionals* within the institution, causing faculty roles to shift in nature and in many cases further dividing the power of shared governance from faculty positions charged with education and management to dividing the professional roles all together: faculty and management.

Why Shared Governance?

Universities benefit when engaging in practices of governance with equitable responsibility and distribution of decision-making power among individuals and groups who have an invested *stake* in the success of the institution of higher education (Laforge, 2020). When universities engage faculty in regular and well-maintained governance practices, institutional decisions can move more rapidly, allow for many voices to be heard when making decisions, ensure the nuances of how implementation may vary across units and levels are considered, and generally feel more equitable (Cramer, 2017).

While there are clear benefits for university operations when shared governance occurs, there are also benefits for faculty members who choose to take part in the process. Birnbaum (1991) highlighted four ways a faculty member may benefit as a result of participating in faculty governance: 1) contributing to the management to their college, 2) providing a forum and a safe space for debating and finding solutions on institution policies, 3) gaining enlightenment on shared understandings of the goals among faculty as they relate to education values and beliefs, and 4) opportunities to demonstrate commitment to professional authority and values of the institution. Jones (2011) argued that while faculty benefit from these lofty university functions over time, there is little immediate reward or gratification for their service and expertise in the governance process. While faculty input is necessary for university decision making, it is often seen as an additional expectation or reserved only for more senior faculty members who are more invested in their institutional operations. To this end, faculty engagement in governance appears to be accepted as an essential part of higher education institutions; however, there is little incentive or rewards offered to balance these competing obligations (Flaherty, 2021a; Gardner, 2019; Jones, 2011).

Additionally, shared governance is an important part of the sustainability and growth of institutions of higher education. When enacted, shared governance protects faculty rights, academic freedom, and expression thereby allowing faculty to completely engage in their areas of expertise and focus on the creation of a robust educational experience (Flaherty, 2021a; Eastman & Boyles, 2015; Gerber 2010; Gitenstein, 2017). Shared governance allows faculty to apply their rich content

knowledge and traditional power over the classroom and curriculum to preserve the institution's culture, academic values, and mission (Brown, 2017). Ultimately, in matters of larger university operations, shared governance extends voice, input, and authority to teaching and research faculty (AAUP, 1994). To this end, a governance system founded on trust and transparency is critical for faculty and staff when making decisions regarding the university while enduring the pressures from external constituents (H. Brown, 2017; Johnston, 2003).

Best Practices in Shared Governance

Scholars have suggested several best practices that have been shown to have an impact on the successful implementation of shared governance practices across institutions of higher education (Bahls, 2014; Gittenstein, 2017; Honu, 2018; LaForge, 2020; Quarless & Barrett, 2017). Across the literature, there are some common recommended practices categorized as: developing a common definition; setting common expectations for engagement; creating a climate of trust; reviewing processes regularly; rewarding and recognizing participation; developing personal and working relationships; and ensuring work is action focused.

Bahls (2014) offers five best practices for shared governance that cut across all types of institutions of higher education (IHEs). These practices create the alignment necessary to allow all stakeholders to be integral leaders.

1. Actively engage board members, administrators, and faculty leaders in a serious discussion of what shared governance is (and isn't).
2. Periodically assess the state of shared governance and develop an action plan to improve it.
3. Expressly support strong faculty governance of the academic program.
4. Maintain a steadfast commitment to three-way transparency and frequent communication.
5. Develop deliberate ways to increase social capital between board members and members of the faculty.

Cramer and Kneupfer (2020) published a three-volume set on shared governance in higher education. In the first chapter of the third volume, Bliss et al. (2020) articulate key elements that should be present in any system of shared governance. Similar to Bahls (2014), they argue that:

- A governance system has bylaws and/or a constitution that specify the specific structures and processes that must be in place.
- Governance bodies have a formal process by which they conduct their meetings, generally parliamentary procedure.
- A governance system has clearly defined lines of communication that are codified in advance of any decision or announcement.
- A governing body should have groups of people who have been given responsibility to make decisions/recommendations.
- Shared governance must specify the means by which representatives communicate with and hear the ideas of those they represent. (pp. 6-9)

There is considerably more literature on shared governance best practices, and some of that will be visited in the discussion section below.

The Near- and Long-term Future of Shared Governance

Communication is one frequent and timeless challenge in the shared governance model between faculty and administration. Divergence between the administration and faculty has been noted as a key reason for communication troubles within a governance structure (Quarless & Barrett, 2017). Arguably, the most often noted difference in communication is based in the opposing concerns of these groups. Administrators are noted with prioritizing the operations of the institution, fiduciary responsibilities, and legal constraints. A new media ecosystem makes communication both simpler and more diffuse, changing our expectations of how we communicate with each other. And, without regular communication, important topics are not openly discussed and agreed upon by faculty and administration alike (Honu, 2018). Tiede et al. (2014) proposed

> the variety and complexity of the tasks performed by institutions of higher education produce an inescapable interdependence among governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others. The relationship calls for adequate communication among these components, and full opportunity for appropriate joint planning and effort. (p. 59)

In agreement, DeCesare (2020) offered that there is a distinct difference between monologue and dialogue.

Distance education, or online learning, has been a growing part of higher education for a while, and some institutions of higher education are pushing the envelope in their mode of growing this enterprise, raising serious shared governance issues. In 2017, Purdue University acquired Kaplan University, a for-profit and largely distance education entity. Faculty engaged the University Senate for a special session to discuss the deal that was announced to the university hours before it was made public (Fain & Seltzer, 2017; Seltzer, 2017). Faculty expressed concerns about lack of information and participation in the decision-making process related to significant university operations such as credentialing, academic program modifications, and curriculum. Similarly, the University of Arizona announced they would be acquiring Ashford University from an educational technology company, Zovio. There, faculty responded with concern and outrage for their lack of awareness and involvement in the considerations. In this instance, some faculty were invited to review the agreements and proposals but were required to sign non-disclosure agreements, reinforcing the sentiment shared by the faculty at large that they were not openly engaged in the decision-making process (Leingang, 2020).

Chaddock and Hinderliter (2017) raised the issue of diversity and the role it plays in shared governance. The necessity for diverse faculty is imperative to the growth and cultural competence of institutions of higher education. Chaddock and Hinderliter (2017) argued three key concerns to diversification attempts: recruitment and retention, tokenization, and speed. One detriment of tokenization is that simply because a candidate is viewed to hold marginalized identities, they may not necessarily be taking up the cause of diversity if they were appointed to the shared governance board. They may, in fact, be against diversity for the topic at hand. A related concern lies within the engagement of faculty who hold marginalized identities within shared governance. Kater (2017) offered that often many of the

systems in place at institutions of higher education mirror the systems of oppression across American society. The systemic power differential creates significant concern that faculty who hold minoritized identities are not free to fully engage in governance and must stifle their opinions. C. Brown and Miller (1998) along with Tierney and Minor (2003) discussed how minoritized faculty begin to feel apathetic towards shared governance after seeing the cycle of tokenization play out: hire a minoritized faculty member to share a *different opinion*, and then make the same decision that would have been made without their identity or expertise present.

The adjunctification of the faculty labor force is another threat to shared governance and problematic in a number of ways. Giroux (2014) argued it is inherent to the corporate model, or what he refers to as *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*. An increasing number of faculty members operate without the benefits relegated to full time tenured and they are charged to meet the same educational outcomes, research and service as their benefited counterparts (Giroux, 2014). And, for any number of reasons, adjunct faculty have little participation in the shared governance at their particular institutions (Gerber, 2014).

The AAUP maintains that shared governance is a crucial underpinning of a well-functioning (AAUP, 1994). Yet, IHEs struggle to implement shared governance in an effective and efficient manner. Thinking of shared governance systematically and as part of the whole system of an institution is critical and explored via the theoretical framework of this study.

Theoretical Framework

There are many ways systems theory can be used to understand organizational structures and cultures (Edwards, 2019; Gordon, 2021; McLinden, 2016; Wilkinson, 2011). Wilkinson (2011) defined systems theory as "a conceptual framework based on the principle that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of the relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation" (p. 1).

Figure 1, modified from Luhman and Cunliffe (2013), visually represents the core components and relationships espoused in systems theory. An effective system consists of many inputs derived from its stakeholders. The transformation process (or deliberation) takes into consideration the inputs from the stakeholders and yields outputs (the decisions). Throughout the system, there is a continual feedback loop to engage stakeholders in the transformation process while it is under review and once concluded. The output is then discussed and may yield further changes, thereby starting the process again. Of note, systems theory acknowledges the importance of a process that is inclusive of many stakeholders within the system and allows for frequent feedback.

The shared governance process in higher education is an example of systems theory whereby the institution is the system, and shared governance is the transformation process. Ideally, and in an effective shared governance model, Figure 1 visually represents the steps in how shared governance would occur within the institution's system. Feedback from stakeholders would generate new input for consideration in a transformation process. This may be representative of a need

acknowledged by any one stakeholder group or across many. Regardless of who initiated the call for consideration, all stakeholders should be represented throughout the process. It is important to note that in systems theory, feedback should flow both into and out of the transformation process before a final output is delivered to all stakeholders. In a similar vein, shared governance should be a multi-staged process with communication and engagement opportunities throughout the decision-making process.
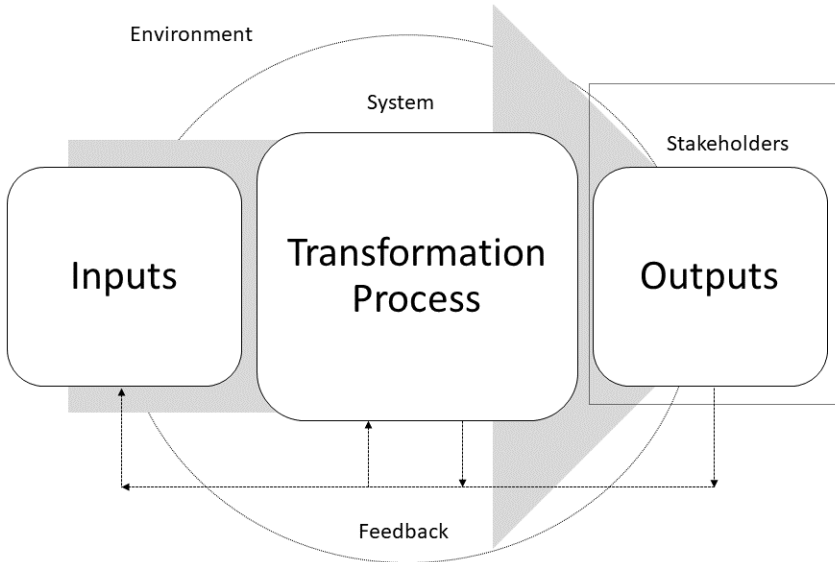
Figure 1: Systems Theory Representation (modified from Luhman & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 169)

One advantage of utilizing a systems approach is that it aids in examining the functions of complex organizations (Gordon, 2021). Faculty members, staff members, students, and administration are groups who intermingle with one another. They coexist at IHEs through a series of structures and systems including classrooms, laboratories, organizations and governing bodies, such as faculty senate and AAUP. This study examined how all of these entities, or systems, work together currently and how they might work better, together, to create a better-defined, and agreed upon, shared governance system.

RESEARCH METHODS

Setting

The setting for this study was a large urban-serving research-intensive university in the southern part of the United States. The institution comprises two campuses, one

of which is largely dedicated to health sciences. The university has roughly 29,000 students and over 23,000 employees. Those employees include nearly 2,500 full-time faculty and nearly 700 part-time adjunct faculty members. The university is relatively young as the current institution is the result of the combination of two institutions that occurred just over 50 years ago. Compared to similarly situated institutions, the size and age of the institution is relevant for the purposes of this study since governance structures and processes are still developing.

Research Design

A naturalistic, mixed methods narrative approach was used to yield rich information on the faculty's perceptions of and ideas for shared governance. A naturalistic research approach allowed the research team to collect qualitative data and analyze those data using inductive and deductive approaches to understand the problem of practice. Creswell and Poth (2018) wrote that naturalistic research is

> …the use of interpretive theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Moreover, an emerging (qualitative approach) inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns of themes. (p. 8)

Narrative research is increasingly used in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like other human beings, are storytellers who individually and collectively lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Moreover, narrative research is the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories to understand and write narratives of experiences (Moen, 2006). To collect those stories and the data, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted. Additionally, a modified charrette-style workshop was employed to gather ideas and recommendations for implementing shared governance practices.

Focus Groups

Van Bezouw et al. (2019) defined focus groups as "multiple individuals engage[d] in a dialogue focused on the research theme which is guided by a moderator" (p. 2721). Multiple means were used to recruit participants. The original intention was to invite all members of the faculty to participate in a focus group via an email invitation to the faculty. However, there was no official faculty listserv, or email list, available to the researchers to disseminate across all faculty. Additionally, when the research team tried to use an external listserv created via the Action Network populated with public information posted about faculty contact information, they were informed that the university's network had blocked emails from Action Network. Efforts were made to invite faculty through the Faculty Affairs and Provost Office and the Faculty Senate, but the researchers were rebuffed there as well.

Ultimately, the researchers compiled a list of leadership of each academic college or school at the university from the individual school websites. The deans of these

units were emailed and asked to share information about the study, recruitment of participants, and requested it be disseminated to their respective faculty members. Additionally, the email invitation was shared with the membership of the university's chapter of AAUP in email and announced at a chapter meeting. Also, the researchers posted the invitation for participation via a faculty event notification email sent daily to faculty, staff, and students. Also, a request was sent via the Facebook group run by the university's teaching and learning center. After the other invitation methods were complete, the Action Network access was restored and an email was also sent to faculty via the Action Network. Lastly, the researchers also engaged personal connections with individual faculty and asked them to share the information with their peers and departments. Faculty were invited to share their interest in focus group participation by completing a brief survey. In the survey, faculty were able to disclose demographic information and self-select their preferred modality, location, and times.

The focus group protocol consisted of 6 open-ended questions and prompts designed to gain in-depth responses (Billups, 2021). The specific questions were based on the literature review gathered on common concerns and recommendations for best practices, predominantly influenced by Bahls' 2014 framework. After the protocol was developed, cognitive interviewing was used to solicit feedback on the focus group questions by conducting a pilot focus group with five faculty members. Cognitive interviewing aims to understand shortcomings and adapt the research instrument, or focus group protocol in this instance, thereby enhancing the quality of feedback garnered (Ryan et al., 2012). The cognitive interviewing process was used to refine the research approach by identifying problems embedded in the cognitive process by which participants engage.

Based on the number of responses received for focus groups, the researchers hosted eight focus groups: six were hosted virtually and two were held in-person. Each focus group consisted of 2-6 participants. Two members of the research team served as moderators for each focus group. The decision to allow for dual moderators allowed the research team to ensure equal focus to the content and the procedures (Billups, 2021). The virtual focus groups were facilitated on the Zoom video conferencing platform and video recorded. In person focus groups were recorded with an audio recorder.

Individual Interviews

Due to concerns for power dynamics, individuals who might skew focus group responses because of the depth of their involvement in faculty governance were asked to participate in the study through individual interviews. Additionally, the research team specifically included outreach to faculty of color and faculty on the tenure track to participate in the interviews.

Using a snowball sampling method, interview participants were asked to identify additional faculty members who would be helpful to interview as well. Ultimately, 21 faculty members were identified and invited to participate. The research team sent individual invitations to the faculty members soliciting participation consent. The invitation included the purpose of the study and requested faculty consent to

participate in the study. In the end, the research team received 11 responses representing university faculty from multiple units and faculty ranks. The interviews were conducted utilizing Zoom for video conference as the means of data collection.

Modified Charrette

The National Charrette Institute defines the charrette as "a collaborative design and planning workshop that occurs over four to seven consecutive days, is held on-site and includes all affected stakeholders at critical decision-making points" (Lennertz et al., 2006, p. v). The design of a modified charrette is different from a normal work meeting, it creates an atmosphere that allows stakeholders to think differently, broadly where unique ideas and values are welcome (Roggeman, 2013).

For the final part of the study, faculty members were engaged in a modified charrette session designed to better understand actionable methods to increase the awareness of shared governance and generate possible recommendations for enacting shared governance institutionally. Members of the university's AAUP chapter were invited to participate in the charrette through multiple mediums of communication. Based on the number of responses received for the charrette focus group, one, three-hour charrette session on campus with two 15-minute breaks was conducted. Seven AAUP members responded with interest, six indicated they would participate in either format and one indicated they would only participate if it was virtual. Given the nature of the workshop design being highly collaborative, the team decided to host the modified charrette in person with the six participants, five of whom attended and participated. While the group was small, three different units were represented and faculty members represented different appointment types, and years of experience. Four of the five participants were male and one was female.

Data Analysis

The recordings of all eight focus groups, all of the individual interviews, and the modified charrette were meticulously transcribed by the capstone team utilizing the Otter.Ai software platform. Once the transcription was complete, participant information was de-identified and the transcripts were coded accordingly with participants 1-29. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and highly specific answers and examples, coding participants was critical to ensure confidentiality of the participants' respective responses. The research team retained a list of the participant codes that was matched to respective participant demographic data (gender, race, tenure status, etc.) for thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Across each data collection method utilized, several themes emerged. The first set of themes are related to faculty perceptions of shared governance and the second set of themes are around faculty ideas for improving shared governance.

Faculty Perceptions of Shared Governance

Three major themes emerged from the data about faculty perceptions of shared governance: (1) Too much administrative power, (2) Devalued faculty engagement, and (3) Desire for change. Table 1 visually exhibits the overarching themes and subthemes that came directly from the data collection.

Table 1: Emergent Themes and Subthemes of Faculty Perceptions

Themes	Subthemes
Too Much Administrative Power	Top-down decisions
	Futile governance structures
	Bylaws and constitutions not followed
Devalued Faculty Engagement	Being valued
	High risk, low reward (fear of retribution, apathy from lack of trust, lack of reward)
	Being engaged effectively
A Desire for Change	

Too Much Administrative Power

Several participants perceived that administration wielded far too much power, resulting in faculty feeling frustrated and not included in the decision-making process. Three secondary themes emerged: top-down decisions; decision-making structures, and bylaws and constitutions that were not followed. The participant's disillusionment seemed to stem from an acknowledgement that there are many layers to making decisions at the university that lay outside of curriculum decisions. Once those layers are peeled back, it becomes visible that there is a hierarchical system that does not appear to support all members of faculty and staff alike.

Participants perceived that decisions were often private and relegated only to the purview of upper administration. Instead, they felt that decisions should be more largely discussed and open for public comment. One participant expressed concerns for the administration making decisions in secret by stating:

my observation [...] [is it has] gotten more so over the past few years. And what it used to be there seemed to be more: more of a communication back, and more engagement. But now there's a lot more secrecy and some of the bigger decisions that are being made at the higher level in terms of hiring of Deans, or hiring of the Provost, and things like that.

Participants also articulated strong opinions and emotions when speaking about decision making structures. Specifically, they indicated that the current structures of governance do not produce decisions that are widely representative of the faculty.

Some faculty articulated that they felt there was too much administrative power by using examples of when they felt bylaws were in place but not followed. These regulatory documents are designed with the intent of providing standard processes and clarity by outlining the rules of engagement. Additionally, participants spoke to the idea that sometimes regulatory documents were intentionally vague when outlining procedures for conflict resolution or final decision-making power if there is not a unified recommendation. One participant shared how they perceived their unit's internal bylaws as a mechanism to support administrative power in instances such as these. "*We have like our faculty bylaws and our committee structure and things like that. But they're vague enough that it's very possible for decisions to be made at a higher level and not to actually reflect the faculty voice, in my opinion.*"

Devalued Faculty Engagement

Generally, participants indicated that they did not feel that faculty were adequately valued or engaged in shared governance. Similar to the instances above that recounted frustration and mistrust of top-down decision making, some participants articulated their experience was more accurately encapsulated by a feeling of being devalued. One participant said:

> *I think we are invited to express our opinion, you know, and these are troubling questions, right? Because I think there is the veneer of our opinions being valued. And I think the current administration has invited a lot of input. And then that's completely disregarded. You know, and there have been really specific instances of that. So, I think they'll say, "Yeah, we really want to hear your voice." But our voices really aren't heard.*

As exemplified through this participant's experience, faculty have a perception that their opinion is invited but ultimately not utilized in the final decision-making process.

In order to feel valued within the shared governance process, several participants mentioned the concept of respect. They voiced concern that their voices and ideas would not be respected by the administration. One participant said:

> *The faculty and the staff, we need to feel like our opinion is going to be respected and actually used because if we don't feel that, then many of us are going to be less likely to attend something, whereas a decision has already been made, we're in the same position on that one, the example. So if we feel comfortable that our opinion is going to be listened to and considered, then you're going to get more engagement.*

Furthermore, participants ultimately articulated three common feelings related to the sub-theme of high risk, low reward: fear of retribution, apathetic views towards future engagement, and lack of reward. Concern for retribution was not only apparent in participants' specific narratives but also evident in how they spoke about the act of engaging in the focus groups and interviews. This unease and distrust was further

exemplified in how two participants responded to one another in a focus group. When asked how freely faculty can express their opinions one participant stated *"[They're] afraid to speak up, especially non tenure [and] tenure track. [They're] afraid to speak up for fear. Even tenure, if it's too controversial there are repercussions. At minimum you're seen as an outsider.*" The expressed concerns demonstrated how concerning the topic of trust is for faculty even when only engaging in a conversation about shared governance.

A Desire for Change

Concerns about too much administrative power and a devaluation of shared governance notwithstanding, participants still expressed a desire to contribute to change through shared governance. Several participants mentioned that despite the top-down management style and lack of perceived shared governance, they still felt hopeful about shared governance. They also declared their commitment and ambition to bring about change. One participant said this in regard to being hopeful around the prospect for creating true shared governance: "*I mean, our goal continues to be a goal almost every pretty much every year for [a] number, [the] last number of years: to work towards shared governance, true shared governance. And, and so I mean, I try to remain hopeful.*"

Another trend that emerged during the interviews and focus groups was that the expressed hopefulness often appeared as a byproduct of loyalty. There were several participants who felt that their loyalty and dedication to the university seem to spear on hopefulness of finding a shared definition of shared governance. Similarly, another participant noted, *"[a] sense of trust, and, and collegiality and collaboration, and makes you feel more positive about, about your work.*" Another shared they felt participation "*doesn't have to be rewarded: the outcome can be the reward.*" Participants such as these engage in governance to connect with the university, influence decisions, and leave their mark upon the institution. Overall, participants placed value in shared governance and the hope they have to engage meaningfully with the process.

Faculty Ideas for Shared Governance

The data showed that shared governance can be increased through two overarching themes: creating collective understanding and increasing engagement. Study participants spoke about the need for a common definition, common structures, and common engagement opportunities to create a collective understanding. To increase engagement, participants noted the need to build trust, increase engagement, and increase transparency through involvement, processes, and rationale.

Table 2: *Emergent Themes and Subthemes of Faculty Ideas*

Themes	Subthemes
Create a Collective Understanding	Common definition
	Common engagement structure
	Common engagement expectations
	University structure and engagement
Increasing Engagement	Building trust
	Increasing communication
	Increasing transparency

Creating a Collective Understanding

We might think of institutional knowledge as the result of collectively created construction that is negotiated in the context of that institution. Another way to think about this is as collective understanding. One of the participants explained how they feel shared governance needs to be better understood collectively:

> *I think clear institutional guidelines for what shared governance looks like, at the different stages within the university at the college school department level, could be helpful. Because what I see happening sometimes is that without those institutional guardrails, individual units are able to use shared governance to create systems that exclude certain types of faculty from the process.*

As noted, shared governance needs to be made clearer before it can be effectively enacted. One way to ensure the *guardrails* are in place, to codify the collective understanding, is to ensure a common definition of shared governance.

Creating a collective understanding also requires common engagement structures and expectations. Participants of the modified charrette identified that inconsistent structures created silos and created unnecessary hurdles to engage faculty across units. Furthermore, varied structures lead to inconsistent experiences with shared governance, ambiguity, and contributed to frustration that was voiced by many participants. Charrette participants also noted similar concerns related to differences in the formal structures across the academic units. However, charrette participants expanded upon this idea to include conversation about the varied expectations and rules for faculty to become engaged. Specifically, one participant noted that their school (an academic unit within the university) does not allow faculty not on the tenure track to participate in certain forms of governance. The modified charrette participants discussed the desire to not only standardize the structures across units but also to create more consistent expectations and avenues for faculty to engage.

Increasing Engagement

Participants articulated experiences about their engagement with shared governance and their perceptions of why others engage or do not engage in governance. Some of the key categories that emerged related to increasing engagement were increasing: trust, communication, and transparency.

Generally, participants recounted a general lack of trust, their expectations for trust, desire for increased trust, concern that administration did not trust faculty, and an overarching distrust for administration. One participant said "There needs to be a sense of trust built and one of the ways that that happens is to let voices be heard, you know, and, and I mean for when our voices are being heard to feel like, that they are really [being] listened to."

Faculty in the study broadly discussed a culture of trust as critical to shared governance. Some spoke to the idea that adjusting institutional culture occurs over a great deal of time, particularly to establish and build trust among faculty. Additionally, many participants spoke to the need to build trust among faculty as a necessary step to improve shared governance.

In addition to building trust, shared governance requires regular and clear communication channels between all university stakeholders. As such, communication was one of the most consistent and pervasive themes in the study as both a primary concern for faculty, second only to the concept of *top-down decisions*. One participant noted the absence of communication as the central cause for concern related to shared governance by stating that *"...the communication always doesn't happen. Which is bad because that's where everything should begin. [...] it'd be reflected in the outcome. And that's, I think, often where things fall apart."*

Participants spoke about regular communication, opinion seeking, and transparent communication as methods to ensure faculty voice is represented and considered in decision making. In the examples, faculty wanted to see more communication as a verb, indicating dialogue and invitation for active engagement, rather than a noun that passively states the outcome or decision. One participant emphatically said this by stating *"We need more information about how decisions are being made, rather than the decision being made and informed after the fact that a decision has been made. And I think that's the key."*

According to participants, one way to build trust and to be more communicative is to increase transparency. One participant exemplified the connection between clear and detailed communication and faculty engagement by sharing:

> *There needs to be very transparent communication for shared governance. I mean, I think if faculty don't know what's happening, or if administration didn't know what was happening, for that matter, but I think it tends to go the other way. But, you know, I think that faculty needs to be made aware of things.*

This participant's example demonstrates their experience of doubting the shared governance process by not receiving transparent communication related to feedback and decision-making. In another similar example, one participant spoke about the lack of transparency as feeling secretive. *"And when they aren't able to recognize when being secretive about decision-making could actually be harmful to the process of*

shared governance. That's when that tendency towards secrecy could become problematic."

Communication at the end of a shared governance process was particularly important to participants. Concern for lack of communication at the end of a process was evidenced by one faculty member who shared "*once that decision is made, there really isn't any explanation that goes down to faculty.*" Participants focused not only on the need for communication to occur at the end of a process, but also, what should be included. "*Usually [we get] some communication [at the end of a shared governance process] but it's not effective. No 'why' is shared.*" This request was increasingly vocalized when the decision seemed different from the perceived faculty opinion. One participant offered:

> *oftentimes with the decision making, there's not a lot of feedback. If a decision is made, contrary to the faculty recommendation, there's also not a tremendous amount of transparency about information that went into that decision making. The faculty involved in it, you know, the task forces, the working groups, those faculty have the information. But it does not trickle down, out of those committees.*

The practice of shared governance at the institution requires regular, open, and transparent communication between all university stakeholders.
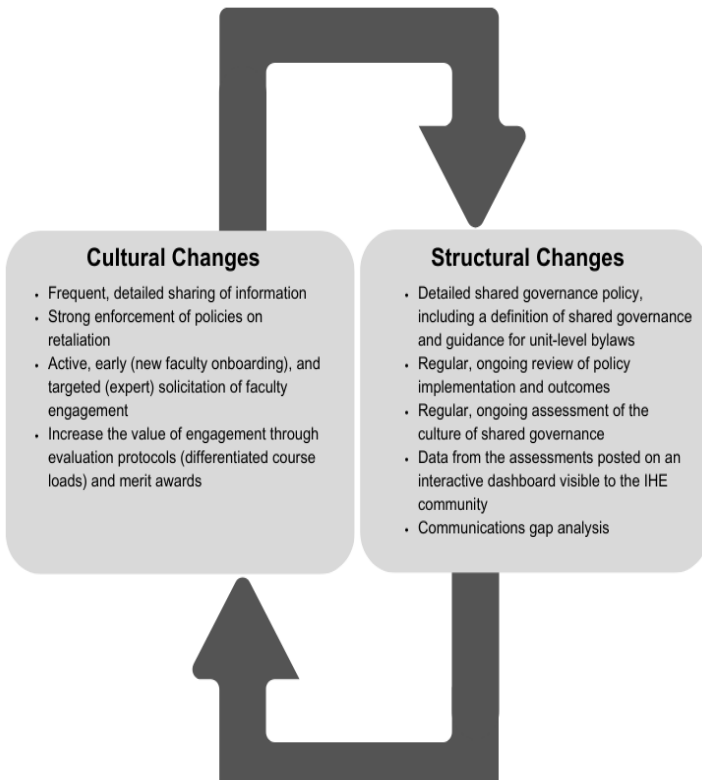
DISCUSSION

In 1971, Kessel and Mink wrote a position paper titled, "The Application of Open Systems Theory and Organization Development to Higher Education." Their central thesis is "...that it is no longer possible for the university to function as a closed system, unresponsive to pressures and needs of the larger society around it" (p. 6).They go on to write about how universities must adopt new governance arrangements that include better communication and constituent groups that have increased senses of personal engagement with the university as a system. Over 50 years later, the findings from this study suggest that this is either still true or true again.

Though still fighting the *ivory tower* image, higher education is a much more diverse enterprise than it was in 1971 and has, in many ways, become more responsive to external demands. But the demands are also more diverse and, perhaps, heavier. Technological developments afford new and unique ways for people to learn, and, currently, there are serious questions about the value of credentials from post-secondary institutions.

Given this existential urgency, we can, again, look to systems theory to understand how to respond to the situation. This theoretical framework is what makes this particular study a valuable contribution to the literature. That is, if higher education is going to thrive in these challenging and uncertain times, all stakeholders must work together, systematically, to make decisions that are the best for the institution and that have the most internal legitimacy as possible. It is systems theory, in fact, that helps us see that transformation occurs when all parts work together, with information flowing between all parts to ensure the relationships between areas support and reinforce one another.

Therefore, based on the literature review, as well as data collected through focus groups, interviews, and a modified charrette, the answer to all research questions come down to two overarching categories to consider improving the practice of shared governance: structure and culture. Cultural components suggest a need to increase trust, engagement, and the value of engaging in shared governance. Structural components speak to the need to standardize systems, workflow, and communication methods between university stakeholders. Figure 2 depicts a model, a system, for shared governance reform with the specific recommendations that flowed from the data from faculty research participants. The arrows in the model indicate that culture informs structure and vice versa; shared governance reform is a cyclical and systematic process.

Cultural Changes
- Frequent, detailed sharing of information
- Strong enforcement of policies on retaliation
- Active, early (new faculty onboarding), and targeted (expert) solicitation of faculty engagement
- Increase the value of engagement through evaluation protocols (differentiated course loads) and merit awards

Structural Changes
- Detailed shared governance policy, including a definition of shared governance and guidance for unit-level bylaws
- Regular, ongoing review of policy implementation and outcomes
- Regular, ongoing assessment of the culture of shared governance
- Data from the assessments posted on an interactive dashboard visible to the IHE community
- Communications gap analysis

Figure 2: *A Model for Shared Governance Reform*

Improving shared governance practice means, first, improving the culture around governance. That means increasing trust, engagement, and the value of shared governance.

Increasing trust means increasing opportunities for stakeholders to interact, share information, and communicate. It also means increased transparency through more frequent and detailed sharing of information. Finally, to increase trust, policies about

retaliation need to be emphasized and enforced so that faculty can feel like they are safe to use their voice in the governance process.

To increase engagement, faculty involvement in governance should be actively solicited. This can and should start as soon as faculty join the institution. Including shared governance as part of the on-boarding process would ensure new faculty members are aware of the defined structures and become aware of how to engage in shared governance processes. Also, active solicitation should involve targeting those with specialized expertise, knowledge and experience, and diversity of ideas and experience should be prioritized.

Finally, participation in governance needs to be valued. This could be achieved through several formal options: a differentiated course load for faculty who participate, additional value placed on participation in the annual evaluation processes, value within the promotion and tenure process, or a monetary bonus for engagement. And institutions should consider ways to highlight and recognize contributions institutionally as well as within individual colleges and schools through communications, announcements, or recognition events for those who are involved in governance processes.

Structural recommendations are built from the findings related to systems, workflows, and communication methods between university stakeholders. First, tied to the cultural changes, assessment of the shared governance culture should be conducted on a regular basis to understand how the proposed environment and institutional values are evidenced in lived experiences of faculty and staff. These assessments would generate data that can be displayed in a dashboard visible to all members of the IHE's community. These data can be disaggregated by unit and in other meaningful ways.

Additionally, all IHEs should have an institutional shared governance policy with a clear definition of what is meant by shared governance and a well-articulated governance structure with coherent rules and expectations. This policy document should, naturally, be developed through a shared governance process and should be visible to all in the community via the institution's website.

The policy document should articulate a regular review of governance processes and structures described in the policy. That review might happen more frequently than the typical policy review process because IHEs are dynamic and policy contexts change quickly.

The IHE-level policy document should also include guidelines for bylaws for shared governance structures and processes at individual units within the institution. Expectations for engagement should be standardized to ensure equitable experiences and accessibility. The regulatory documents from each unit such as constitutions and bylaws should be reviewed and standardized to ensure more efficient and consistent operations.

Finally, IHEs should conduct a gap analysis to understand the best channels of communication for specific audiences or message types. Communication channels should allow for faculty connections across the institution so that faculty do not get stuck in their silos and have awareness of what is happening across the institution.

As articulated by Wilkinson (2011), systems theory framework allows one to understand and change the overarching system by discerning the context of the individual parts of the system based on their relationships to one another. Understanding the findings of study through this framework allowed for the creation of recommendations to address the overall system by influencing the structures and cultures. Furthermore, those recommendations have been pieced together as a model for shared governance reform (as depicted in Figure 2) that reflects the ideas of system theory. Cultural changes and structural changes inform each other in a cyclical and systemic way. And these changes happen at different levels of an institution that each, in turn, inform each other. If shared governance is to work, attention must be given to the whole system simultaneously and the impact on the whole system of any one seemingly minor change must be considered.

Institutions of higher education are complex systems. Therefore, when all parts of the institution work together, with information flowing between all parts to ensure the relationships between areas support and reinforce one another, progress ensues. And this is exactly what shared governance is: balancing power between university faculty and university administration such that all parts of the system work together, with information flowing between all parts to ensure the relationships between areas support and reinforce one another to make the best policies, practices, and operations for all. In this transitional time, postsecondary institutions need faculty and administration to work together to ensure the path forward allows higher education to thrive. Harvard University's Henry Rosovsky was noted in a January 2017 interview as stating "equally important for the promotion of excellence in the university is an emphasis on shared governance. The faculty needs to be involved directly in the process of running the university and in the setting of priorities." The sense of urgency for faculty to be involved in the governance of the institution has only increased. Battles over power will only cause institutions of higher education to fracture at a time when they need to be strong. In other words, in these times of political polarization and technological change, shared governance is more imperative than ever. Institutions of higher education must attend to their culture and structures around governance to ensure that decision-making is a shared endeavor.

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