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Collegiate, Collaborative, or Consultative Governance: How Do We Get There From Here?

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Maybe we should get rid of "shared governance."

By Richard T. Ingram

It has been said that we mere mortals do not live by bread alone, but by catchwords and phrases. In the academy, "shared governance" is part of our lexicon, one of our most sacred cows. The term is thrown around in casual conversations, at academic conventions, and in print as if we all know its origins and definition. It is at the heart and soul of faculty senates. It is at the center of the doctrine and liturgy of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

But most of us don't know the origins of the term, have widely different perceptions of what it means functionally, and continue to use it sometimes naively.

In this article I address three propositions. The first is simply that *the academy—its academic, executive, and lay leaders—would benefit from discarding the term "shared governance" and perhaps substituting it with one of the "C" words in the title of this article.* I contend we need to find a suitable replacement for the term with a common definition and a more contemporary view of how decisions are actually made, how "governance" really works in different ways across our very diverse campuses. As time has passed, the term has been abused and misunderstood; we need a new way to think about academic decision making and "who" has responsibility (with commensurate accountability) for "what."

My second proposition is that *we should be concerned more than we seem to be about the dysfunctionality of the academic senate in so many of the nation's colleges and universities.* The reasons for the general decline in the standing and influence of the traditional faculty senate are many and complex, though unanimity is absent on what these organizations are supposed to do. Nonetheless, there is plenty of blame to go around for what has happened to faculty senates. Some argue that the "corporatization" of the academic boardroom is the main culprit, but I think they are wrong. Among the factors that have weakened the faculty's voice in institutional decision making as traditionally exercised through the mechanism of the academic senate are consequences of intense competition in the marketplace, the understandable preoccupation of faculty with their disciplines, tenure and promotion requirements, and our seeming inability to reward faculty *service to the institution*, among others. Regardless of the reasons for the phenomenon, however, most colleges and universities would benefit from renewed efforts to redefine (or at least revisit) how, and on what matters, what voices should be engaged.

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At the same time, however, a recent study of the relationship between the practice of tenure and the participation of faculty in governance reveals that faculty are generally apa-

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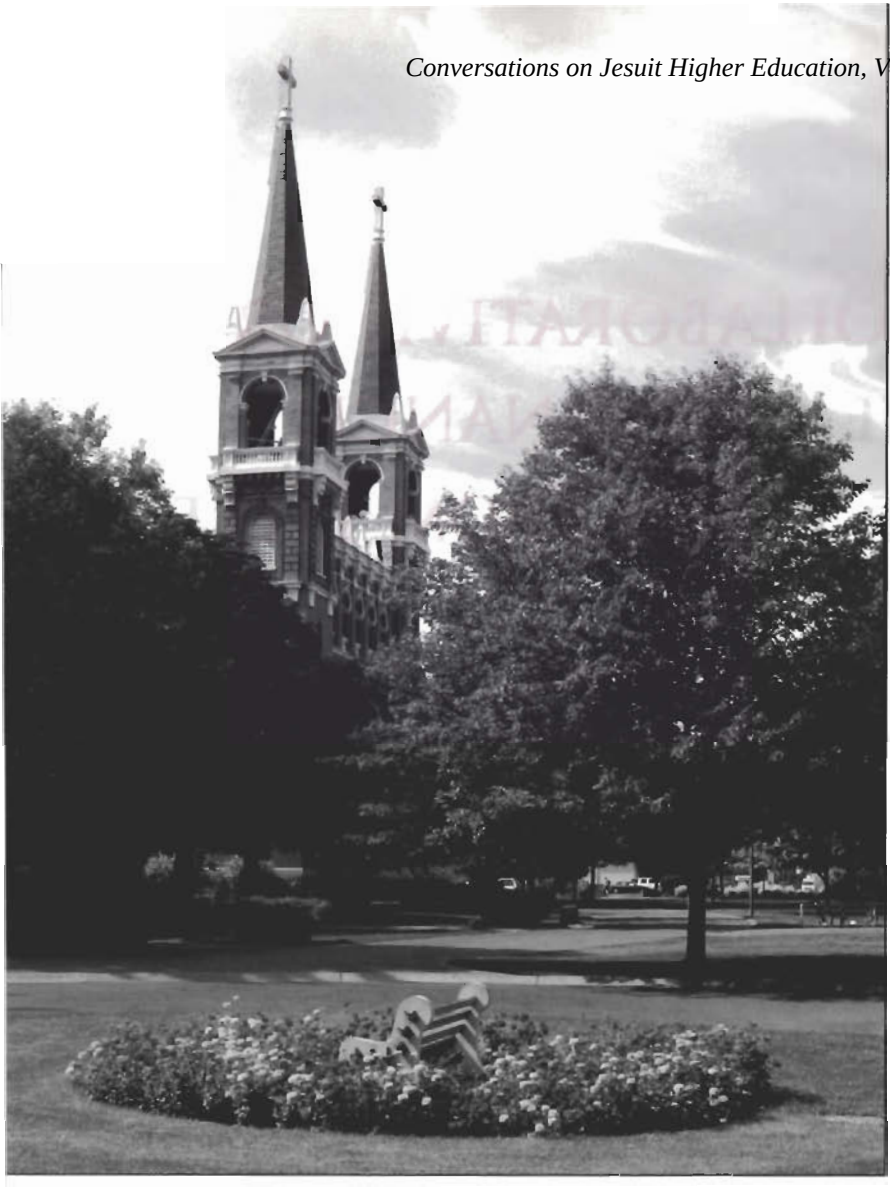

St. Aloysius Church at Gonzaga University.

thetic to the latter (Chait, *The Questions of Tenure*, Harvard University Press, 2002). Should we be concerned about such a trend if it is one?

A third proposition: *Presidents should continuously seek new and fresh opportunities to enable trustees to have access to faculty members and, of course and most especially, students.* Many presidents get this right, but many others are very uneasy about faculty-trustee interaction. The fact is that today's trustees seek such engagement and have much difficulty if they sense that their interest is being frustrated.

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Trustees want to be trusted to do the right thing, and they increasingly resent being "sheltered" from those who teach and learn. Wise presidents seek creative ways to close the sometimes broad chasm between their boards and those who really are what the enterprise is all about.

Consultative Governance

Curious about the origin of the term "shared governance," I tried some years ago to discover who may have coined it. Although unsuccessful, I rediscovered John J. Corson who probably did more to advance the broader term of "governance" in our everyday speech than any other single person. One of the early students of modern academic management and trusteeship in the late 1950s, Corson in *The Governance of Colleges and Universities* (McGraw–Hill, 1960, revised 1975) defines "governance" as "the processes by which decisions are arrived at, who participates in these processes, the structure that relates these individuals, and the effort that is made (or should be made) to see that decisions once made are carried out, and to assess the results that are achieved."

Perhaps the reader of this article knows the origin of "shared governance" and will provide that information with the editor of *Conversations* or to me. Did it emerge, as has been suggested to me, from a conference sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education sometime in the late 1960s? Was the word "shared" intended to connote the idea of "equality" among the parties engaged in institutional governance?

Interestingly, the term does not exist in the document one would assume might have been the source: the 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* published and widely disseminated by the American Association of University Professors. This statement was the result of collaboration among AAUP, the American Council on Education and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. (The respective boards of the participating associations at the time did *not* endorse it, however; rather, they "*commended* it to the attention of their respective members"—an important distinction that is sometimes overlooked by some AAUP chapters!)

The statement, which holds a prominent place in AAUP's *Red Book*, elaborates the primary domains of the faculty, management, and governing board. Subsequent to its publication, the AAUP unilaterally added some provisions and clarifications to it. Although higher education's landscape and realities are much changed, there remain value and useful perspective in the original statement.

In 1998, the Board of Directors of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges published a "Statement on Institutional Governance." It encourages all governing boards and chief executives to "examine the clarity, coherence, and appropriateness of their institutions' governance structures, policies, and practices." From a governing board perspective, it offers some principles to guide the engagement

of faculty (and other internal and external stakeholders) and trustees in exercise of their responsibilities. It suggests standards of good practice, calls for more specificity concerning who can make what decisions, and in so doing, urges distinctions among "communication," "consultation," and "decision making."

Interestingly, as in the AAUP statement, the term "shared governance" is nowhere to be found in the text. It simply was not necessary to use it. (The AGB statement is published in booklet form along with a second document, "Governing in the Public Trust: External Influences on Colleges and Universities." The latter piece suggests how boards should responsibly contend with voices from outside of the academic institution.)

The story of how the governing board of Hiram College dealt with the faculty's recommendation for the institution to offer its first master of arts degree (in interdisciplinary studies) is told in "Trespassers in the Groves of Academe?" (*Trusteeship*, January/February, 2005). "How," the trustees asked themselves, "do we respect the prerogative of faculty and academic administrators to design and implement academic programs but still fulfill our obligation to chart the institution's path...?" In the end, they performed their duty responsibly by asking the proponents of the new degree program certain questions bearing on the program's relationship to the college's mission, sources of revenue, scope of additional technology investment required, the nature of the competition, marketing plan, length of time to the goal of self-support, and program evaluation. Thus the trustees "walked the fine line" with a proposal traditionally, appropriately, and primarily in the faculty's domain, but one that required trustee engagement as responsible fiduciaries.

By the same token, it is arguable that collegiate management has a responsibility to engage faculty leaders in discussions of the trade-offs that have to be made in planning and budgeting. Priority-setting requires broad consultation even though it is clear, or it should be clear, that it is the board and president who reserve the ultimate authority to make these and similar categories of decisions.

Wither the Academic Senate?

Happily, there are many examples of functional academic senates within the Jesuit community of institutions. But there seems to be an irreversible trend for presidents across private sectarian and nonsectarian higher education to work "around," rather than "with and through," their academic senates. Thus, the use of ad hoc rather than standing faculty committees and the tendency for presidents to personally select faculty leaders to represent the institution and faculty in various internal and external institutional undertakings.

Perhaps, one day, something new will be invented to replace the traditional senate. In the meantime, the trustees are largely befuddled by what the senate does or does not do, how "faculty governance" works at their institution, how the president decides what issues to take or not take to the senate—and why. We should do better by them even at the risk of their challenging some of our working assumptions. Surveys by the Association of Governing Boards as part of its Board Self-Study Workshops reveal time and again that trustees feel woefully uninformed about how the faculty voice is sought or heard at their institution.

Communication and Trust

We need the best possible communication and highest levels of trust between boards and presidents, between presidents and faculty, and by extension, between faculty and trustees and students and trustees. Faculty and students are what the institution is about, but trustees come to campus with minimal or no regular opportunity to meet these individuals, to have some unstructured time to really get to know one another as fellow human beings, to share experiences. Surely there is room for more creativity and experimentation on these scores.

The foregoing is, of course, less about "governance" than it is about building appropriate relationships. But the concepts are related and important. Chief executives and provosts have organized occasional dinners in faculty homes for interested trustees and their spouses. Trustees have been invited to classrooms as observers or guest speakers in their fields of interest. Faculty panels have made presentations to boards on their sabbatical experiences. Students who have recently returned from exchange programs overseas have been invited to board meetings or for after-dinner presentations on their experiences. The possibilities are endless.

In the end, let's try to do better at being "collegial" in our colleges, "collaborate" more than we may have done in the past even if it takes more time, and "consult" more with those who are most directly affected by decisions under consideration.