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Colette Windish

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Avenue of the Oaks, Spring Hill College.

STEP BY STEP

The Road to Shared Governance

By Colette Windish

What is shared governance? At most colleges, faculty members are involved in governance as far as academic matters are concerned, but the idea of shared governance implies a much broader participatory role. It recognizes that the board of trustees, the administration, the faculty and the professional staff, although exercising distinct responsibilities, are colleagues who are equally interested and concerned with the well-being, reputation, and day-to-day work of the college.

Shared governance is achieved when all constituencies participate fully in the decision-making process of the college, including the areas of budget and finance, student affairs and strategic planning.

In November 2009, when the provost asked the faculty of Spring Hill College to assess the current state of the college and its need or not for a different gover-

nance model, many questions were raised. What is the role of the faculty within the greater body of the college? How can or should the faculty contribute to governance? How does the college balance the roles of its different constituencies? Is any meaningful change possible?

These questions were especially pertinent in light of the 2008 economic crisis and its financial consequences. As at many other schools, numerous decisions that affected the faculty had been made and were being made at Spring Hill College without proper consultation or information. This was antithetical to the Jesuit ideals of *cura personalis*, but it also had its roots in a paternalistic model of college governance that we shared with many other colleges.

Colette Windish is an associate professor of French at Spring Hill College.

The problem

One thing was clear: the faculty felt unhappy and their main voice was one of critical disenchantment. A shared governance committee of a small group of eight faculty members was thus promptly formed and I served as its chair until May 2011, when the faculty adopted a new model of governance for the college. This was a very exciting and time-consuming process that was served by the tireless dedication and enthusiasm of my fellow committee members. We believed that we needed to help the faculty overcome the feeling of alienation which it felt from the administration in governing the college. Faculty believed that their input was not appreciated and their efforts were useless. Creating a sense of shared governance could help restore meaningful engagement.

We were faced with several questions. Would we simply consider faculty governance or would we expand our scope to shared governance at the college level? How could we involve the rest of the community? How would the administration and trustees react? Our process therefore had two goals: involve the whole community and craft a viable governance model.

What we did

The information side of the project was to respond to a college culture that lacked proper transparency, consultation or accountability and to the fact that the very concept of shared governance was not understood by everyone on campus in the same way. To deal with these issues, we organized open forums, reported to the faculty on a regular basis, posted our minutes and documents we were studying on the college website, invited other members of the community, including the president, the provost, the cabinet, and the vice-president for student affairs to share their views. We knew that the process could not succeed if we did not have a constant conversation with all of the governing partners. We were less successful in trying to expand the membership of the committee, which remained heavily skewed towards faculty in the social sciences and humanities.

Restructuring

To reach a viable model, we started by assessing the problems Spring Hill was facing in terms of morale and faculty involvement and looked at governance models from other Jesuit institutions and small Southern colleges. There was much philosophical and pragmatic debate between improving *faculty* governance and instituting wider *shared* governance. In a way, our committee was only representing the faculty, but we came to the conclusion that, to obtain meaningful change, we needed to expand the scope of our endeavor. One of

our main goals was to provide a structure that insured that all committees were held accountable and reported to a wider body, to avoid redundancy and/or lack of transparency. The small size of the college and our normal 4/4 teaching load meant faculty members were already overburdened with committee work. This meant streamlining some existing bodies, while adding others. It also meant sharing the load between tenured and untenured faculty members more fairly.

In April 2011, the committee proposed a college-wide shared governance model resting upon a bicameral system, with a faculty assembly and a college senate, made up of representatives from the faculty and other constituent groups (administration, staff, and students). The committees of the faculty were designed to oversee academic affairs and issues of exclusive concern to the faculty and the councils of the senate to oversee the non-academic aspects of the college community. The transition process started in May, with the election of the new executive committee of the faculty assembly whose charge includes implementation of the new model.

Lessons learned

We are still faced with serious challenges. Although we had initial enthusiastic support from our president, the process of consultation with staff and administration over the summer, while still ongoing, revealed strong resistance from some administrators who are wary of faculty encroachment on what they see as their turf. We are hoping to see the revised model eventually adopted by the board of trustees, but we are much further from that than we thought at the beginning of the summer.

This experience offers many lessons about attaining better governance. Philosophical and pragmatic considerations do not always sit well together, but you must try to compromise to achieve your goal. It is also crucial to nurture difference of opinion and minority voices; we had as democratic and transparent a process as we could, and it was made better by people who disagreed with the majority opinion. Another lesson is that there can be a real gap in communication and articulation of common goals between the faculty and the staff and administration, but you can only make a substantial difference when you cross those boundaries.

Maybe the most important lesson I learned from this process is that the process is the key. You cannot change a culture overnight, but our work has made shared governance part of the campus vocabulary. Our final proposal was a starting point and one that will evolve once implementation progresses. What we have tried to provide is a framework for better shared governance and the real test will be the sharing of governance on a day-to-day basis in the future. ■