Talking Back: A Trustee Reflects

Winston Churchill
Responses to the Fall issue on governance

TALKING BACK

A Trustee Reflects

What students most need from expensive education is spiritual formation.

By Winston Churchill

In the most recent issue of Conversations, which focused on how to govern our institutions of higher learning, one of the themes that dominated its pages was the question of shared governance: How has it succeeded? How has it failed? Is it still a useful construct, or should we seek, as Richard Ingram and Robert Moore Jr. suggested, to abandon the term in favor of an alternative?

When considering shared governance in today's climate, the discussion usually emphasizes the role of the faculty senate, and its relationship to the president and other higher-level administrative officers. This is of course understandable, but it can lead to the unfortunate implication that participation in shared governance does not extend to university trustees. I think it's time for trustees to actively reinsert themselves into this dialogue. As several of the authors in the last issue of Conversations argued, shared governance is ultimately about open communication. I would take this one step further: shared governance is not just about the communication of different concerns and perspectives, but about different constituencies figuring out how to teach each other and learn together.

I see this as a step beyond the more prosaic open-communication model, and one that seeks to foster not only awareness, but depth of understanding and insight into the different and sometimes conflicting perspectives of the faculty, administrative officers and trustees. Many of the complaints about shared governance focus on the fact that it can be a cumbersome and slow process. Finding consensus is hard work, and in the short-term it is not always the most efficient route. However, I always try to advocate in favor of taking a longer view, and I have found that working towards real agreement among the different constituencies not only leads to better decision making, but also to better implementation.

The question of shared governance and open communication has become particularly important for our institutions in recent years. One of the questions I often ask the boards on which I serve is: What does it mean for an institution to have a Catholic identity in an increasingly pluralistic society? This issue has become more urgent due to the less tolerant and more xenophobic winds that have been blowing in our country. In the post 9/11 world, much of American society has responded...
to a fundamentalist threat from abroad by adopting a more funda-
mentally religious culture at home.

In the first months of 2009, cultural and moral issues have been
at the political forefront, from Terri Schiavo and stem cell
research to evolution and the concept of a living wage. These are
dividing lines across which many on both sides believe compro-
mise is neither attainable nor desirable. These issues have and
will continue to create unrest among our students, our teachers
and ourselves.

For Catholic universities and colleges that have worked so
hard to integrate a specific reli-
gerious identity with the genres of
cultural pluralism and academic
freedom, these increased tensions are doubly complicated. We try,
usually successfully, to offer a lib-
eral education in a faith-based
institution. The legacy and mis-
sion of our universities has been
depth steeped in the traditional
values on both sides of these
debates, and consequently. Both
sides will make strong claims that
themselves represent the "true" ide-
ality of what a Catholic institution is
or should be. While many contin-
uously worry about the threats of
ever-increasing secularization,
others believe the greatest danger
is from the other extremes.

Such ideological conflicts are
often seen as expressing the soft
underbelly of shared governance,
as different groups clash while
attempting to assert their respec-
tive agendas and the result is a
stalled process. It is true that
shared governance does not offer
a magical solution to such prob-
lems. However, I think that clari-
ty and transparency of roles and
relationships between various
consortiums can go a long way
in preventing a climate of sharp
disagreement from transforming
into a crisis. The primary benefit
of a clearly defined and widely
established decision-making
process is that it helps to manage
expectations, and enhances the
perception of fairness in out-
comes.

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Another issue that often inserts itself in the
discussion of shared governance
is the threat of competition, or
what I have previously called
"managed education." Like the
current phenomenon of managed
healthcare, managed education
comes in the form of new and
agile competitors that are more
adaptable to the immediate needs
of our students. This new type of
educational competition, in the
form of professionally-oriented
schools, distance learning pro-
grams, and an increased competi-
tion from universities outside the
U.S. provides a unique challenge
to Catholic Universities. Integral
to how we view our mission—
and how we challenge our stu-
dents—is that we seek not only
to educate them, but to help them
grow spiritually. In a world in
which educational decision-mak-
ing has already started to move
away from time-honored institu-
tions and brand names to post-
graduate employment salary sta-
tistics, this part of our mission is
simultaneously becoming more

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