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In Shared Governance, What Role for the AAUP?

Maybe we should get rid of "shared governance."

By Robert Moore, Jr.

Often times, those outside of academia, and particularly those from the corporate world, are astounded at what they view as inefficiencies in the shared governance systems found in colleges and universities. The committee structure in the academy seems cumbersome to them, and the pace of change appears too slow. From this corporate perspective, it seems unfathomable that employees (i.e., faculty members) should wield such a degree of power in the decision-making process. If assessed strictly from a basic corporate perspective, the critics may have a point. But applying a "one-size-fits-all" corporate governance structure onto complex academic organizations would ignore a central reality: the university is not just any corporation, and its "product" cannot be so easily reduced to inputs and outputs.

The core mission of most colleges and universities is the education of its students. This education may take many forms, but in general it assumes that intellectual curiosity should be encouraged, and therefore that academic freedom among the faculty must be protected. Through the tenure system we assure that faculty members are able to responsibly pursue their research and teaching interests without fear of retribution or job loss. Colleges and universities, in turn, are able to provide students with the highest quality of education. Without a sound system of shared governance that grants tenure, the quality of education would be in jeopardy, as would the ability of a college or university to assure that its mission is advanced through succeeding generations of faculty and administrators.

Systems of shared governance in higher education have evolved considerably over time, and in the early 21st century there are a number of different forms. We can examine the different manifestations of shared governance by comparing their features to a standard set of characteristics. One source for such a standard is the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and its 1966 statement on "Government of Colleges and Universities." (See: https://www.aaup.org/statements/Redbook/Gocees.htm).

The AAUP, founded in 1915 by John Dewey and others.

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21 University
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has focused throughout its history on championing the cause of academic freedom and its necessary linkage with academic tenure. Wherever possible, the AAUP has sought to promote and seek enforcement of language and policies in faculty handbooks and other documents that provide for academic freedom, academic tenure, and academic due process.

While standards related to academic freedom and tenure continue to be the main focal point of the organization, it became apparent to AAUP officials early on that one could not always disentangle issues of academic freedom from issues of sound institutional shared governance. Thus, in 1966, after a variety of smaller statements on specific aspects of governance, the organization drafted a comprehensive “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities.” Contained in AAUP’s Policy Documents and Reports, the statement on governance reviews the roles of the various constituencies in the governance process. In examining such broad areas as “general educational policy” (e.g., curriculum and student instruction), “internal operations of the institution” (e.g., planning and budgeting), and “external relations of the institution,” the AAUP statement discusses the proper roles of the governing board, the administration, the faculty, and the students.

With respect to the faculty, the statement contains the following language:

The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter, and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process. The faculty sets the requirements for the degree offered in course, determines when the requirements have been met, and authorizes the president and board to grant the degrees thus achieved...Faculty status and related matters are primarily a faculty responsibility; this area includes appointments, reappointments, decisions not to reappoint, promotions, the granting of tenure, and dismissal. The primary responsibility of the faculty for such matters is based upon the fact that its judgment is central to general educational policy...The faculty should actively participate in the determination of policies and procedures governing salary increases.

The statement goes on to offer general suggestions for an effective governance structure with respect to representative bodies, faculty senates, standing committees and other venues for faculty input.

From the AAUP perspective, the faculty is the body primarily responsible for general education policy. But it is noteworthy that the Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities was jointly formulated by the AAUP, the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB). Thus, even though the AAUP is often referred to as the “voice of the profession,” it is important to note its adherence to standards and policies that are commandeered by other constituent groups within the university, including the administration and the board. The statement refers to the “joint effort” required in running an academic institution, and notes the “inescapable interdependence among governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others.” It details the respective responsibilities of these constituencies in different areas and recognizes that there are limitations, legal and otherwise.
on the power of the faculty. While the AAUP is often portrayed as an advocate for the faculty, it is, in reality, an advocate for those standards and policies that make for a stronger institution of higher education for everyone involved. Ideally, while there may be differences of opinion among the various constituent groups in higher education, adherence to AAUP standards enhances the educational experience for all, not just faculty.

Yet, allowing the faculty to play an important role in the governance of an institution is central to the long term interests of the school, its mission, and its students. In the area of curriculum, for example, the faculty possesses the expertise in the various disciplines and can best judge academic quality.

As Jesuit colleges and universities review their core curricula, the role of the faculty is central. Not only can the faculty members provide necessary academic expertise. Their role is also valuable insofar as they begin to learn and uphold the core values of the mission as they are manifested in the curriculum. If there is concern about upholding Jesuit values in the future, it is important to educate the faculty. By allowing faculty to play a key role in the revision of the core curriculum, the institution not only benefits from their expertise. It also assures that the mission, as reflected in the curriculum, lives on as the faculty members pursue their long term careers at the college or university.

The same argument can be made with respect to hiring, promotion, and tenure. "Hiring for mission" has become an important issue in recent years, and it is assumed that any Jesuit college or university has a vested interest in hiring those individuals that embrace or at least endorse its mission. Some have argued that academic quality and pedagogical excellence might be sacrificed if mission-related characteristics are over-emphasized; others have maintained that these various desirable attributes are not mutually exclusive. From a governance perspective, by allowing the faculty the primary role in hiring, promotion, and tenure, and by educating them on the desirability of certain mission-related characteristics, the institution can win on both the academic quality and the mission criteria.

In sum, a sound system of shared governance, with a high degree of faculty input and involvement, is essential to the long term interests of colleges and universities if they wish to remain competitive and academically credible. In addition, if utilized properly, they can aid Jesuit colleges and universities, in particular, as they seek to infuse their institutional structures and cultures with grounding in the mission. While some may argue that it is easier and more efficient to initiate change through executive order, the damage of such a corporate approach would be substantial. A sound system of shared, collegial governance may be a slower means to incorporating change, but in the long run, it provides the best approach.