

Debate and Discourse: The Role of the Faculty Senate on the Modern American Campus

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Shared governance in higher education is a critical component of academic management. The use of faculty senates is the primary mechanism for engaging faculty, yet these bodies have been increasingly viewed as ineffective. Through an analysis of ten purposefully selected universities, faculty senate meeting minutes were analyzed to identify the trends that senates address. Using one academic year as a case study, these senates were identified to be addressing significant campus issues under the themes of academic affairs management, student life and student affairs issues, campus planning, human resources concerns, and faculty personnel matters.

INTRODUCTION

Shared governance in higher education has an historical foundation that includes representation by students, faculty, trustees, and increasingly, staff members. Each of these constituents engage, to various extents, in offering advice to college leaders, reactions to proposals, and in many cases, offering resolutions or actions for programs or policies. Through an evolution of the structure and administration of higher education, each of these constituents has also had to advocate for their rights to be engaged in campus decision-making, with some successes and some failures (Rosser, 2003; Miller & Nadler, 2006). The recent faculty activism at the University of Iowa had little to no impact on the board of trustees hiring a campus president with limited higher education experience (Markwardt, 2015), yet at the University of Missouri, student activism was a key component that led to administrative changes in response to diversity issues.

The shared governance complex in US higher education has been perhaps most focused on faculty involvement in governance. Faculty members once controlled all elements of institutional life, ranging from what was to be taught, when, by whom, and to whom. And although faculty are still engaged in setting admission standards and determining curricular requirements, their ability to control the larger campus has diminished significantly.

The reduction in faculty authority over campus elements has arisen in part due to the changing functionality of higher education institutions, meaning that the complexity now required to lead an

institution requires a much greater level of oversight and specialization than at any time in the past (Bai, 2003; Miller, 2003). An increasing public burden on colleges and universities has also resulted in a growing administrative class, with these professionals being charged with enforcing and ratifying state and federal compliance in such areas as Title IX and ADA compliance. These responsibilities, and the interpretation of them, requires non-faculty members to take an increasingly significant role in campus management, therefore marginalizing the role that faculty members can play (Miller & Newman, 2005).

Faculty governance units are subsequently left with the options of either challenging the growing trend of administrative responsibility through their actions, or conversely, relenting these responsibilities and focusing on their core activities. In order for there to be some practical discussion as to what faculty members options truly are, there is a need to better identify what faculty governance units are discussing, where they commit their time, and what do they view as important enough to dictate their agendas. Therefore, the purpose for conducting this study was to create a profile of what faculty governance units are addressing in their meetings, and use this agenda information to create an outline of their priorities.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Faculty governance units, typically referred to as academic or faculty ‘senates’ or ‘councils,’ generally function on a model of representative democracy, although their structures and practices vary greatly. Some institutions make use of a formal election, with strict regulations on who can vote and what can be spent on campaign materials. Other institutions make use of rosters of faculty signatures, where a faculty member can create an independent constituency by garnering a set number of faculty signatures. Some allow for part-time faculty representation, while others limit participation to those who hold full-time, tenure-track positions.

Some institutions, such as Ohio State University, make use of an integrated shared governance model. This model, established in 1972, brings faculty, students, and staff together in a unified body to discuss issues and come to consensus on important issues (Ohio State University, 2015). A somewhat different model of a faculty governance unit is seen at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), where the senate president, Ann Karagozian (2010) identified the academic senate as a “vehicle through which University of California faculty share in the operation and management of the University” (p. 2). In this model of shared governance, developed in 1920, only tenure-track or tenured faculty along with academic administrators have a seat in the senate.

Gilmour (1991) indicated that almost every college has some form of faculty senate, and that they are in no way limited to public institutions; one example being Birmingham, Alabama’s Samford University. The Samford Faculty Senate is detailed in the institution’s Faculty Handbook as a representation of the overall faculty, particularly noting “...the Senate shall provide a forum for discussion and decision in bringing to resolution the respective interests of the administration, Faculty and schools of the University” (p. 9) and “The Faculty Senate shall identify and address issues of concern to the Faculty that transcend departmental and school boundaries” (Samford University, 2014, p. 10).

A similar structure is in place at Boston’s Emerson College which makes use of a Faculty Assembly, first established in 1969. The by-laws of the Assembly report their purpose to be “...to discharge the Emerson faculty’s collective responsibilities in matters pertaining to the requirements for the granting of degrees; faculty status and welfare...the determination of general educational philosophy and policy; and related matters” (Emerson College, 2014, p. 2). Although but two examples of private college faculty governance units, they are reflective of the common threads that define their existence throughout the higher education enterprise. They are consistent with their public institution counterparts in defining their purpose as to reflect the interests, needs, concerns, and beliefs of the faculty in bettering the welfare of the institution.

There has been a significant amount of research and writing on shared governance in higher education, with much of the current thinking about faculty governance being tied to the activism movements of the late-1960’s and early-1970’s (Mortimer, 1974; Mortimer & McConnell, 1978). Research on contemporary issues in faculty governance, however, have been increasingly tied to

determining the impact of shared authority and whether such collaboration makes for better decisions or a more effective university campus (Brown, 2001; Waugh, 2003; Cordes, Dunbar, & Gingerich, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODS

Data were collected by consulting web-based faculty senate or similar portals, specifically identifying faculty meeting agendas and corresponding meeting minutes. The study replicated that of Smith and Miller (2016) who collected and analyzed data in a similar way. Using a random sampling process, higher education institutions were selected, with replacement. Each institution that was selected was explored to identify its version of a faculty senate. Once the senate was identified, the senate’s web-based resources were consulted for a full presentation of meeting agendas and minutes for the calendar year 2015. If the meeting minutes were incomplete or not posted, the institution was removed from consideration and the next randomly selected institution was consulted. The process included a total of 39 different institutions being selected to produce a sample of 10 universities identified that could be, and were, included in the analysis (see Table 1 for sample institutions).

**TABLE 1
INSTITUTIONS INCLUDED IN THE STUDY**

Institution	# of Faculty ¹	Enrollment
Central Connecticut State University	452	12,037
Columbus State University	473	8,307
Kansas State University	1,404	24,146
Texas A&M University	2,700	64,373
University of Missouri – St. Louis	1,325	16,809
University of Nevada	1,325	16,809
University of North Alabama	1,528	20,898
University of Southern Mississippi	322	7,243
Washington State University	2,262	20,043
West Virginia University	1,870	29,175
Average	1,305	21,787

¹Institutionally reported full-time faculty members.

One important difference between the current study and the Smith and Miller study was that only public institutions were included in the sampling and all private institutions were removed from consideration. This sampling strategy was determined to be appropriate in that it (a) narrowed the scope of the sampling to increase the generalizability of the findings, (b) reflected the differences in private institution mission, and (c) reflected the tendency of private institutions to not include broad and comprehensive senate materials on their websites.

FINDINGS

As shown in Table 2, each institution selected for study was designated with a letter, ranging from A-J to protect institutional identity, and an initial analysis of their meeting minutes was conducted. In this analysis, each posting of meeting minutes were examined to determine the number of meetings during an academic year, the number of elected senators, the number of senators who attended the meetings, the length of the meetings, and the range of meeting length. A total of 99 meeting minutes were examined in

this analysis. On average, these institutions held nine meetings over the course of the academic year (on average, one per month), and had an elected senate size of 62 members, of which, on average, 48 senators participated in each meeting (an average 77% attendance rate). The largest senate had 122 elected members, and the smallest had 35 elected members. The meetings throughout the entire sample ranged from 20 minutes to 4 hours and 46 minutes, with an average meeting length of one hour and thirty-one minutes.

TABLE 2
FACULTY SENATE BASELINE MEETING DATA

Institution	# Meetings	# Senators	Average Meeting Attendance	Average Meeting Length	Length Range
A	10	50	39	:55	:20-1:30
B	9	88	71	1:28	1:16-1:45
C	13	76	60	1:26	:45-2:06
D	10	122	84	1:27	:25-2:40
E	10	27	20	NR	NR
F	9	42	37	1:02	:38-1:30
G	9	100	78	1:08	:45-1:46
H	8	40	NR	1:01	:35-1:25
I	9	44	34	3:02	2:23-3:45
J	12	35	25	3:39	3:05-4:46
AVERAGE	9	62	48	1:31	:20-4:46

The next step in the data analysis was to have each of the three researchers independently read all of the meeting minutes and record themes and major topics of discussion. The intent of this activity was to establish a listing of topics, and then themes, discussed by the sample faculty senates. This initial analysis yielded consensus on the identification of 68 different topics, which after editing for duplication and comparing similarly intended, but differently worded concepts, resulted in 48 topics to be clustered. Each independent researcher then clustered these concepts into groups of thematically similar ideas, resulting in 14 different clusters or themes of faculty senate work (see Table 3).

The majority of topics addressed by these faculty senates were related to student issues, either student academic affairs or issues related directly to student life. The academic issues ranged from service learning and scheduling classes on Fridays to attendance policies and community college articulation agreements. The student life issues addressed topics such as Greek life, athletics, and the recreation facility provided for students. The second most popular topic addressed by the senates were academic affairs, including discussion and voting on the academic calendar, accreditation, general education, and a range of other issues.

Another topic that consumed multiple sessions on multiple campuses was that of faculty senate operations, keeping its committees working, and personnel appointment appropriately. Conducting faculty senate business included discussions of appointing unfilled senate seats, conducting elections, updating senate bylaws, and defining the role of the senate. Other topics (themes) discussed by the senates, and occasionally voted on by senates included benefits, the academic infrastructure, faculty personnel matters, research, technology, and the overall campus culture.

The single most discussed issue across all meeting minutes was that of a faculty handbook, being discussed in 24 different meetings (24% of all meetings). These issues include discussions of updating requirements for faculty member evaluations, clarifying a range of policies on how many classes to be taught, online education, evaluation of instruction, and even required office hours. Many of these types of issues were also discussed under the theme “Faculty Personnel Matters,” and included tenure and promotion criteria and processes, sabbaticals, and the conversion of clinical to tenure-track faculty.

Human Resources, Planning, and the Campus Culture were also themes identified from meeting minutes, and the theme with the least number of topical discussions was that of Technology. Technology related agenda items and discussions were only brought up in 7 different meetings, with two of those seven being related to cyber security issues and two being related to an electronic delivery of core classes by a system.

TABLE 3
THEMES IDENTIFIED FROM FACULTY SENATE MEETING AGENDAS

Theme	Agenda/Discussion Items for Agendas
Academic Affairs	Academic curriculum approvals (n=21) education reform (n=9) Accreditation (n=6) Academic calendar (n=4) Syllabus requirements (n=2) Non-traditional and interdisciplinary curriculum (n=2) Honorary Degrees (n=2) Data request protocol Local school district requirements Summer school Large class size policy International education Independent study
Academic Infrastructure and Curriculum	Academic structure/curriculum (n=7) Library Smart classrooms General education Instructional resource center Classroom space
Campus Culture	Faculty attitude survey (n=2) Campus welfare and the environment (n=2) Military and veterans Inclusivity Recycling Diversity Title IX Professor of the week
Campus Human Resources	Concealed weapons on campus (n=4) President's evaluation (n=3) Dean's evaluations Retirees association Personnel issues
Faculty Handbook	Faculty handbook revisions (n=6) Faculty handbook (n=5) Clarification of handbook (n=6) University handbook (n=2) Faculty manual updates (n=7)
Faculty personnel matters	Tenure and promotion guidelines (n=2) Non tenure track faculty (n=2) Tenure and promotion policies Faculty appointments Sabbaticals Adjunct faculty review Conversion of faculty member contracts
Faculty Senate Business	Senate seats/elections (n=5) Senate seat vacancies (n=4)

	<p>Shared governance issues/structure (n=4) Senate protocol/bylaws (n=3) Faculty senate elections (n=3) Role of the Senate (n=2) Committee assignments (n=2) Length of faculty senate meetings and attendance</p>
Human Resources/Benefits	<p>Benefits (n=11) Parking (and during athletic events and access) (n=4) Salary/furlough (n=2) Human resources (vendors and tuition benefits)</p>
Physical Campus	<p>Construction complaints (n=4) Children in the classroom (n=2) Facility (repair) (n=2) Fire drills Service animals Use of money for facilities</p>
Planning	<p>Planning/Board of Regents (n=10) Strategic planning (n=7) Budget (n=3) Legislative sessions (n=3) Strategic planning (n=2) Planning metrics Budget process</p>
Research	<p>Research on campus (n=3) Research support for faculty Digital scholarship curations Research and NSF</p>
Student affairs	<p>Academic integrity policy Student success (n=2) Enrollment (n=2) Title IX (n=2) Athletics (n=2) Greek Life Student recruitment and planning Recreation center Social media policy Weather policy</p>
Student Academic Issues	<p>Student evaluations (n=4) Service learning (n=4) Academic dishonesty (n=3) Honor code (n=3) Friday classes (n=2) System and 2+2 agreements Mid term grade policy Student attendance Academic misconduct Transfer of academic coursework New admission standards Orientation and new student enrollment Incompletes/grades/marks Academic integrity Student attendance policy</p>
Technology	<p>Information technology (n=3) Cyber security (n=2) Electronic core (n=2)</p>

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The faculty senate meeting agendas provided an insight into the operations and content of how senates work and what kinds of issues they invest their time in. Generally, they had good attendance levels and worked on issues that were directly related to the faculty and academic experience of higher education. Although there was no indication as to whether or not these bodies were effective or efficient, they did address issues such as benefits and curriculum that have formed the historic foundation of shared governance.

What became clear throughout the data collection and analysis is that there is something of a lack of transparency not only within faculty senates, but broadly within higher education. The number of faculty senates with incomplete information, a failure to post agendas, meeting minutes, and even current listings of faculty senators bespoke some of the national discussion of problems with reporting tuition, fees, and expenses. Even the process of attempting to identify the current number of full time faculty members was problematic, as numbers of faculty were inconsistent throughout institutional reports (for example, in Common Data Set reporting, on admissions reporting, and in faculty senate reporting). Even though individual actions may be correct, such as in the apportionment of senators, the public may find it difficult to accurately understand an institution.

On average, the apportionment of senators was 1:21, yet none of the faculty senate documents analyzed indicated whether or not these senators worked to understand their constituents and represent their interests. In some of the meeting minutes there were very clear indications of senators speaking to the interests of their academic disciplines, but there was a lack of documents that indicate how senators collect the interests of their constituents (email, public meetings, etc.).

Another dimension to faculty senate minutes was the use of these bodies as a communicative tool by administrators. In almost every instance, a significant portion of the faculty senate meeting was used to present announcements or addresses from senior institutional leaders such as presidents, chancellors, and provosts. This use of the senate as a communication tool is suggestive of the ladder of faculty involvement in governance (Miller, 2003) where senates are structured to serve a variety of different roles, including informing faculty (Level 3) and consulting with faculty (Level 4). As a group, these senates did not operate at the higher levels of faculty control, with the exception of one senate that voted no confidence in a system board of trustees and openly challenged their policies. The group generally informed the other senators of actions and changes on their respective campuses.

Although not included in this study, the topics covered in the senates were appropriately related to the academic and faculty experience on their campuses, yet the study did not include formal votes or designating action items. This means that although faculty senates talked about benefits a great deal, these dialogues did not necessarily result in action items. Further research should take voting into consideration and such results could further answer the question about whether or not faculty senates are effective tools in framing the collective voice of faculty on important matters that face a campus.

Academic administrators might use these findings to realize that faculty senate behaviors do encourage open communication and discourse about issues that face their institutions. Administrators might subsequently structure their involvement in senate meetings by laying out a routine of informational speakers, with the vice president for student affairs attending the senate meeting once per year or semester and similar kinds of routine reporting from governmental affairs, athletics, etc. These reports could also be shared online through the senate portals as formal 'letters/reports to the senate' that might subsequently reach larger faculty audiences.

The current study was limited to a small sample of institutions and only one academic year, creating an opportunity for further research that can lead to a better use of faculty senates and create a more inclusive environment for shared governance. Senate leaders must come to understand that their role is not to simply get through an experience or to run efficient meetings, but to represent their constituents and bring together an institutional faculty for the best interests of an institution, and as a result, might explore faculty senator orientations and leadership development programs as mechanisms to improve the operations of contemporary senates.

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