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Locating Power at the Heart of Conflict:
The Role of the Faculty Senate in Establishing Curriculum

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Abstract

The belief that university faculty own the curriculum is held widely throughout American institutions of higher education, both public and private. The 1990s saw the first significant challenge to that belief. Using the Marxist and Foucaultian understanding of power and using a paradigm for understanding the functions of faculty senates in the context of larger university governance structures, this paper examines the curricular debates and their implications at Texas A & M (TAMU), the State University of New York (SUNY) system, and George Mason University (GMU). Lying behind the struggle for power and understanding was a significant paradigm shift from positivistic modernism to postmodernism. What on the surface seems like a loss of power for the traditional understanding of faculty senates with respect to curriculum development and changes becomes a new paradigm for power. Shared governance, a term widely used in higher education administration, no longer seems to represent the shifting power relationships between faculty senates and administrative bodies. New ground rules must be established for a better working relationship.

immediate identification (Parkay & Hass, 2000). Those social and political forces exist both as definable entities such as communities and as symbolic perspectives that are matters of perception from external and internal groups to the university.

Curriculum, by practice, is a political act that brings to the fore, suppresses, or alters the transmission of knowledge. Who determines what knowledge is valuable? In fact, who determines what knowledge is? Levin and Clowes (1991) noted that a shift from a modern, positivist perspective, normative until the 1970s, to a post-modern perspective made considerable changes to institutional discourses on curriculum. They described the modernist perspective as grounded in “logical positivism” (p. 4) and the post-modern perspective as a questioning of “the hegemony of a world view dominated by western, male, majority perspectives (the master narrative) and discipline-based perspectives which explain the whole (totality): it represents belief in individual agency (free will and rational decision-making)” (p.

voices of history were to be heard? Debates regarding the discourses of various disciplines were primarily worked out in departments, the most obvious location of power for faculty decision making (Williams, Gore, Broches & Lostoski, 1987). Faculty senates saw themselves as the final points of change for those curriculum debates—particularly in general education—and the curricula they established were products of those wide-ranging debates, often unobserved by the public, but a topic for criticism by Alan Bloom (1987) and William Bennett (1988) who contended the basic values of American higher education were being eroded (Levin & Clowes 1991).

This study examined three of the curriculum debates in the 1990s at Texas A & M

theory and sociological models for shared leadership, this paper demonstrates how the subtle dance of faculty senates with local administrations, governing boards, and accrediting bodies is not only vital to a healthy view of curriculum, but is also vital to the success of shared governance. Faculties have always had to meet the requirements of accrediting bodies with respect to number of hours in degree programs and specific learning outcomes that can be measured during and after the completion of a program. Generally, the requirements of accrediting bodies have not been viewed as violating the principle of faculty control of curriculum. From an examination of these representative cases, a pattern emerged that will be suggested as a means for resolving these faculty senate versus governing board difficulties.

Defining Critical Terms

When examining power in terms of intellectual and material capital, the work of Karl Marx and Michel Foucault emerge

Working from a post-modern perspective, Foucault defined power in a very different way:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting targets; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power. (1980, p. 98)

From Foucault's perspective, power seemed more like energy. Power was highly decentralized, and its ownership was shared and continually shifting, if it could be said to have ownership. From Marx's perspective, individuals owned power, and it became the source by which control was given. From Foucault's perspective, power seemed to provide almost limitless potential, never with the intention that it became oppressive. The adoption of the Marxist perspective leads to the examination of struggle and explosion of myths to power. The adoption of the Foucaultian perspective leads to an examination of the way power is distributed through bodies and organizations. In the literature on higher education, both perspectives have found their way into scholarship. The phrase "loosely coupled," a term used to describe connections that are not direct, sometimes ad hoc, and often shifting, seems more closely allied with Foucault's notion of power (Weick, 1976).

In addition to critical terms for power and its means of instrumentation, models for understanding faculty senates are important in aiding the present examination. In

perhaps one of the most important studies of faculty senates, Birnbaum (1991) outlined the senate based on its symbolic functions. Drawing implicitly on Marx's notion of ideology and power, Birnbaum noted that with the faculty senate, "an institution can suggest the existence of faculty authority even when it does not exist" (p. 12). In the study, Birnbaum enumerated the "latent functions" as opposed to "manifest functions" of the senate as symbol, status provider, garbage can, attention cue, screening device, organizational conservatory, and pastime (all terms he developed in his study). The edge that a Marxist analysis, emphasizing manifest and latent power, provided here also contributed toward a more than potential trivializing of the role of the faculty senate. Minor (2004), departing from Birnbaum's study so that he may stress how senates do functional effectively, examined information from actual surveys and interviews with faculty senate presidents. From his study, he developed a set of marking characteristics for four models: functional, influential, ceremonial, and subverted. Functional senates developed where faculty were in charge of traditional areas, including curriculum development and change. In universities with functional senates, "administrative authority is often strong" (p. 349), and where the faculty "are not particularly assertive and usually do not set their own agenda" (p. 349). Influential senates are characterized with more global campus concerns than just those connected with faculty. In curriculum development and change, they have "authority," and in other areas not traditionally associated with faculty, they have influence (p. 350). Minor noted that influential senates "usually maintain a collaborative, rather than a confrontational, relationship with administration" (p. 351). Ceremonial senates were described as "relatively inactive and inoperable" (p. 351), and they served as "scapegoats for the administration, provide status

for particular faculty, or act as a screening device for future administrators” (p. 352)—characteristics also noted in Birnbaum’s study on the ritual and symbolic aspects of leadership (1991). Subverted senates, according to Minor (2004), are those whose “governance is undermined by alternative venues of faculty participation” (p. 352). The senate exists, but actual decision-making often happens in administrative “kitchen cabinets” (p. 352). Such senates are often noted as contentious, and their role on campus is continuously under scrutiny and suspicion. These categories provide significant insights for understanding the flow of power within a faculty senate and between the faculty senate and administrative bodies.

Universities in Conflict: Faculty Senate vs. Administrative Control

Case One: Texas A & M (TAMU)

History of conflict. After a two-year curriculum discussion at Texas A & M University, in November 1995, the Faculty Senate passed a proposal that would have required all students seeking undergraduate degrees to complete two 3-hour courses under the rubric “U.S Cultures and International Requirements.” At the December 1995 meeting, a letter from President Ray Bowen was presented that detailed his reasons for rejecting the proposal (*Faculty Senate Minutes*, December 11, 1995):

You and the members of the Senate leadership know of the criticisms that have been directed towards higher education by national and regional groups. Books attacking higher education and perceived abuses surrounding the rarely defined concept of multiculturalism have been a growth industry. Most of the criticism of the Senate proposal has been out of the belief that the proposal is identical to, or

faculty and administration were thus noted. Rhetorical flourishes also continued in the January 16, 1996 meeting, in which a speaker related the rejection of the curricular proposals to the dismissal of Galileo's findings about the universe by the Church: "in the final analysis, truth prevailed" (*Faculty Senate Minutes*).

Analysis. The disagreement between the TAMU Faculty Senate and the president provided an almost textbook case of the challenges facing a university with the paradigm shift from modern positivism to postmodernism that Levin and Clowes (1991) outlined. There were clearly differing models for understanding American and world history and culture at the center of this ideological conflict. In fact, that President Bowden referred to politically conservative publications on the state of higher education without specifically using the authors' names was indicative of the knowledge of multicultural discourse and its backlash that must have been present on campus. An examination of the faculty senate minutes both before and after the conflict arose showed that the senate was attempting to be an "influential senate" (Minor, 2004), given their attention to student behavior that involved racial/ethnic stereotyping and in attempting to address HIV/AIDS awareness on campus (*Faculty Senate Minutes*, May 9, 1994; *Faculty Senate Minutes*, November 13, 1995). In Foucault's term, the senate was attempting to employ power through a "net-like organization" (1980, p. 98). Bowen's language was more reflective of the language to oppressive power—a power with which he symbolically presented himself as only the apparent instrument rather than the source. He claimed to be acting on behalf of multiple constituent voices to disguise his own control of power. Floyd (1986) noted a trend among university presidents to see their roles as "managers of an institutional decision

process” (p. 2). Bowen’s language was one of management, including protecting the institution.

President Bowen did not use the language of shared governance; the Faculty Senate did. He spoke of multiple constituents; faculty did not. Wright (1995) noted that some of those constituents were the Texas Republican party and the TAMU Collegiate Republicans. Bowen’s actions, rejecting the curricular changes, reduced the body to that of Minor’s “functional senate” (2004). One of his remarks about the lack of communication of the Faculty Senate with the entire faculty also followed Minor’s model of the “subverted senate,” in which a suspicion of “lack of confidence” (2004, p. 353) surfaces in their representative abilities. If the Faculty Senate meetings of December 11, 1995, and January 16, 1996, are taken as battlegrounds for struggle, the TAMU Faculty Senate appeared to have lost an amount of power in representing some of its most fundamental aspects. The war was certainly one of language and metaphor—an aspect that one faculty member hinted at with his reference to a line in T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “Dare I dare to disturb the universe?” (*Faculty Senate Minutes*, January 16, 1996). Clearly the Faculty Senate was dismayed, but they vowed to continue their pursuit of knowledge. The power they had hoped to display through their net-like postmodern conception of truth met another force—one of oppression. President Bowen called into question both material and symbolic aspects of faculty senate governance and representation.

Case Two: SUNY

History of conflict. In 2000, another curricular battle occurred between the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York, a system consisting of 64 campuses. On

the website for the system, there is a list enumerating the responsibilities of the Board of Trustees. Near the bottom of the list is the following series: “Regulate tuition, fees and charges, curricula and all other matters pert

suggesting the following changes in its current general education requirements. These changes are being proposed in the spirit of our continual attempts to improve our students' already acclaimed education. However, the BU Faculty Senate wants it to be known that we as a faculty have not, cannot, and will not consider your expressed concerns as mandates regarding how our courses are actually taught here in the classrooms of Binghamton University. Instead we intend to continue to teach our courses with the intent of having our students engage in critical thinking about issues concerning the ever-changing world and its potential future.

There is a noticeably strident tone, with some defiance. In the final analysis, however, because there was the potential loss of campus funding for offering general education courses and an increased scrutiny of its own campus general education courses, the Binghamton Faculty Senate decided not to pursue action after the implementation of the core (Schmidt, 1999).

Analysis. SUNY boasts itself as being the largest system of higher education in the United States and as such would require a great deal of central administrative control. In fact, the Board of Trustees has given itself responsibility and control for all aspects of university governance (SUNY Board of Trustees, 2004). With respect to the imposed curriculum, two levels of faculty governance were disavowed: the university-wide Faculty Senate and the individual campus unit organizations. The effect, using Minor's models, was the creation of a "functional senate" (p. 348). An examination of minutes from the systemwide senate shows little activity above that designation, perhaps because the Board of Trustees controls not only potential but actual power (*Senate Reports 2000-*

must react to. The BOV waved a set of syllabi for a “reputable university” at us. The issue is central to what faculty does. We do not expect the BOV to change in the future, so now is the time to censure. (*Faculty Senate Minutes*, May 18, 2000)

Another speaker used the word “micromanaging” (*Faculty Senate Minutes*, May 18, 2000) to describe the Board’s actions. The result was a censure, which had little effect. The general education core curriculum as changed and approved by the Board of Visitors became the GMU requirement (Benning, 2000).

Analysis. Of the curriculum debates examined in this study, the GMU case was the most developed along the modern/postmodern divide, and it was also the most advanced case where the traditional prerogatives of the Faculty Senate had been transgressed. Both macro and micro levels of curriculum were impacted in the Board of Visitor’s decision, and the particular intrusion into the actual classroom—the micro level—was seen as the greater encroachment. While it was the case even as early as 1966 that governing boards held the ultimate authority in university governance, faculty through their senate organizations were accorded a measure of shared governance. Such a position began to change.

What seems ironic on one level is the lack of communication that existed between the Board of Visitors and the GMU Faculty Senate. Meece’s initial commendation of the Faculty Senate’s work on curriculum seemed to operate from the vantage that the senate was merely an advisory body. The members of senate, on the other hand, believed they had operated not only in good faith effort, but had exceeded those bounds, thus generating the need for a censure. The battlegrounds here were those of a typical and almost classic Marxist struggle for power, with the Board of Visitors generating an

ideology of power and responsibility and the Faculty Senate re-envisioning the almost mythic notion of faculty control of curriculum. In terms of Minor's models of senates, the GMU Faculty Senate operated most clearly as a "functional senate" (2004). The governing body with a particularly focused ideological agenda controls the limits of senate responsibility and in fact defines the role. From the perspective of the governing board, a functional senate is precisely what was needed. From the senate perspective, such treatment relegated them to the status of Minor's "subverted senates" (2004). In the year following the curriculum debate, the Board of Visitors allowed a liaison committee to the governing body; thus there was some gesture toward communication as well as participation granted (*Faculty Senate Minutes*, January 24, 2001).

Conclusion

As Birnbaum (1991) noted, Faculty Senates will continue on college campuses. In his study, he noted that both latent and manifest aspects are important to the faculty, with the latent aspects being the principal reason that those who wish to abolish Faculty Senates should rethink their positions. Yet if faculty senates are to work with campus administrators and governing boards, certain ideological grounds must be established.

With respect to the role of administrators and governing boards, the following must be observed:

1. While campus administrators and governing boards are always responsible in a public way to a variety of constituents, an adversarial relationship with the faculty senate will not aid administration in speaking to those various constituencies.

2. While campus administrators and governing boards are responsible for curriculum in general and programs in particular, they must rely on the expertise of faculty to determine the nature of specific programs in the context of accrediting bodies and particular curricular requirements.
3. While campus administrators and governing boards may impose curricular changes at universities, they must understand that imposing such changes against faculty senates undermines not only campus good will but even the very foundation of university power. There are consequences.
4. Power must function as shared engage

which they are only a part. Such a position does entail some loss of the previous understanding of autonomy and control. To a certain extent, however, such control has long ago passed to accrediting bodies for the overall university and to special programs in particular.

3. Tierney and Minor (2003) suggested that faculty senates must also understand that not all campus decisions need to be senate concerns and that to be successful university structure must be “loosely coupled” (p. 12). The desire for tight coupling—seen in some of the examples—simply does not represent the best situation for campus organization and academic life.
4. Faculty senates must be more aware of their own protectionist mentalities, so that they do not create armed camps at the university.
5. If faculty senates are to be effective, they must also be willing to scrutinize their own actions in order to see if they are representative of their campus communities. Challenges will come to governance; being prepared is important.
6. Faculty must do more to educate th

of making the new curricular changes operational. By no means did these faculty senates lose ultimate power; in fact, they have learned more about the subtle construction of power in its postmodern phase. Research by Tierney and Minor (2003) showed that between 82 percent and 93 percent of institutions ranging from four-year universities to doctoral institutions have faculty senates and that they remain durable institutions for faculty representation. To quote Foucault (1980) along with an addition, “[faculty senates] are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. [Faculty senates] are not only its inert and consenting targets; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, [Faculty senates] are the vehicles of power” (p. 98). To quote Eliot, they have “dar

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