

# Shared Governance in Colleges and Universities

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A Statement by the  
Higher Education  
Program and  
Policy Council





or a number of years, we have been hearing calls for a new, more “efficient” way of administering our institutions of higher education. It is said that:

times have changed;

colleges and universities ought to be run more like businesses;

the rapid technological changes taking place—computerization, the Internet, Web-based courses—require adaptability;

the marketplace of higher education is rapidly changing, with wholly online institutions and for-profit universities creating competitive challenges to our traditional ways;

faculty are too slow to make decisions to adapt to change and cling to outmoded models of deliberation and reflection when action is required;

faculty resist efforts to keep the curriculum up to date and inappropriately inject politics—multiculturalism, liberalism—into it; and

the tenure system stands as an obstacle to greater accountability and improved performance.

Because an ever-growing number of board members and administrators with this mindset have reached positions of responsibility on campus, a direct assault is being launched on the practice of shared governance in higher education. There is a feeling among political

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Shared governance is the set of practices under which college faculty and staff participate in significant decisions concerning the operation of their institutions. Colleges and universities are very special types of institutions with a unique mission—the creation and dissemination of ideas. For that reason, they have created particular arrangements to serve that mission best. For example, academic tenure protects the status, academic freedom and independent voice of scholars and teachers. Shared governance, in turn, arose out of a recognition that:

- academic decision-making should be largely independent of short-term managerial and political considerations;
- faculty and professional staff are in the best position to shape and implement curriculum and research policy, to select academic colleagues and judge their work; and
- the perspective of all front-line personnel is invaluable in making sound decisions about allocating resources, setting goals, choosing top officers and guiding student life.

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cial and political potential of this industry, they seek to run our colleges more on a “corporatized” business model. The corporate model is characterized by commercializing and breaking apart the elements that make higher education great.

The corporatized college president has become the CEO, no longer the academic leader. The agendas of the top administrators in public colleges often are informed by political considerations, not academic ones. The educational mission is seen as just one aspect of a multi-faceted “business” in which the institution is engaged, which may include job training, entertainment, sports, housing, health care, and private corporate research and development. Under the guise of efficiency and confidentiality, top administrators are being recruited by professional search firms with a diminished faculty role in their selection. The voice of the faculty and staff is relegated to an advisory role rather than that of a full partner in the institution’s success.

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The corporatized model of college governance has engendered a real crisis in higher education. It threatens the integrity of the key educational and research functions that faculty and staff perform, through:

- outsourcing jobs essential to instruction, including the design of courses and introduction of computer-based teaching elements;

- redirecting the teaching of courses from full-time dedicated professionals to exploited part-time and temporary faculty, graduate teaching and research assistants, with low pay, little security and no academic freedom;

- re-orienting the curriculum toward business-oriented coursework, including more courses designed to “train” students for the “real-world.” Traditionally “academic” courses are pressured to be more “practical,” and generally there is less concern for a broad-based liberal arts curriculum intended to help students develop and mature intellectually into critically thinking democratic citizens;

- buying and selling “courseware,” through the appropriation of computer-based intellectual property for purposes of commercial exploitation;

- developing for-profit teaching and/or research subsidiaries of colleges and universities, which are out of the reach of public scrutiny; and

- forming commercial consortia with other universities and private investors.

Increased workloads, restrictive tenure standards, pressures to incorporate new technologies in teaching and demoralization resulting from top-level assertions of power have had the predictable, if perverse, effect of decreasing the willingness of faculty and staff to participate in the shared governance of their institutions.

The erosion of shared governance imperils the elements that produce quality education and scholarship. Shared governance is like the system of checks and balances in state and federal government. Excessive power and control concentrated in any one level of the institu-



The following are six basic principles of shared governance that should be observed in establishing, maintaining and strengthening our institutions.

Faculty and professional staff, particularly those directly involved in teaching and conducting research, should have the lead role in determining the content of the curriculum, degree and certificate requirements, standards of instruction, student achievement standards, grading, and all matters relating to student progress in academic programs. To fulfill this responsibility effectively, faculty and professional staff must be given access to information and resources. Their judgments should be subject to overrule only rarely, with compelling reasons provided.

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have suitable arrangements for their voices to be heard and given proper weight in decisions that affect the mission and operation of the institution. For example, all faculty and staff should play a direct and prominent role in developing and advising on institutional budgets. All faculty and staff should have a leading role on institutional committees, task forces and decision-making bodies that affect their work and are within their areas of expertise, including search committees for choosing presidents and administrators.

Given the growing interdependence among faculty, staff, students, administrators and institutional boards, all of those who aid in the design and/or implementation of the academic mission of the college or university have a stake in shared governance. While full-time faculty have traditionally been able to claim a central role along with top administrators and boards, a number of trends, accelerating since the last quarter of the twentieth century, favor the expansion of governance roles to other staff. For instance, the increased specialization of traditional academic functions, away from active faculty involvement and toward professional and technical personnel, necessitates the inclusion of these experts into appropriate roles in shared governance. Similarly, the enlargement of the role of non-tenure-track and part-time/adjunct faculty, as well as of graduate employees (teaching and research assistants) calls for the development of appropriate means and mechanisms to draw them into shared governance.

The forms of shared governance and degrees of participation will vary according to the particular institutional arrangements currently in place, but each group whose work contributes to the academic enterprise should be involved in a manner appropriate to its institutional function and responsibilities.

The organizational forms of shared governance differ among institutions, depending on institutional history, norms and customs. In many institutions, these forms are called senates or assemblies, though these terms are not definitive, for faculty senates may include or exclude administrators, non-teaching professionals, non-tenure-track and part-time faculty.

In many colleges and universities, faculty and staff have turned to collective bargaining, both as a way to increase the influence of their voices, to provide institutional means for their voices to be heard and represented in the absence of pre-existing roles for them in shared governance, or to support and bolster the existing structures of shared governance. Unionization is a basic democratic right of all employees. Higher education unions are democratically elected representatives of these employees with a legitimate role in shared governance.

A standard management tactic, however, is to attempt to convince faculty and staff—especially during campaigns to establish collective bargaining—that the existence of a faculty or staff union will destroy the “collegiality” of the shared governance process. In particular, the argument goes, the union will take over the powers and responsibilities of the faculty senate or whatever the governance body is called.







