

# **Shared Governance in Higher Education**

**Demands, Transitions, Transformations**

VOLUME 1

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# Conclusion

## Working Together to Share Governance

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### ABSTRACT

In this final word in the volume, I detail answers to the two questions posed to the panelist for the wrap-up session of the conference: (1) What do you take away as the single most important message you have heard at the conference? (2) Looking forward to the future of shared governance, how can—or should—it be best achieved as universities continue to evolve in this first part of the 21st century?

The answer to question 1 involves developing a strategy to engage and retain faculty, staff, and students to work with sympathetic administrators in a process of shared governance. That means identifying appropriate faculty, staff, and students and demonstrating the alignment of their goals with those of shared governance. It also involves agreeing on a reasonable timeframe for action, as well as clarity as to what will be expected of them. Finally, it is important to follow up the results of shared governance action to allow necessary adjustments to unanticipated consequences of these actions.

The answer to question 2 involves fostering a sense of trust and mutual respect among participants. Participants need to be empathic, taking into account differences in conceptions of the university and the roles played by the different participants. Additionally, the process involved in a shared governance action, the information necessary to accomplish the task, and the results of the activity need to be transparent.

Finally, faculty, staff, and students need to realize that they have leverage to affect administrative decisions because of their knowledge, expertise, and experience—as well as their necessary involvement in implementing campus policies and programs.

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1 For the final wrap-up session of the “SUNY Voices Conference on  
 2 Shared Governance for Institutions of Higher Education in the 21st Century: Beyond Stereotypes,” a panel was asked to sum up the activities  
 3 of the conference. The moderator of this session, who was also the  
 4 co-organizer of the conference, Peter Knuepfer, President of the SUNY  
 5 University Faculty Senate, asked the panelists to respond to two questions: (1) What do you take away as the single most important message  
 6 you have heard at the conference? (2) Looking forward to the future of  
 7 shared governance, how can—or should—it be best achieved as universities  
 8 continue to evolve in this first part of the 21st century?  
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10 The following is an illustration of the response of one panelist, based  
 11 on attendance at many of the concurrent sessions and his multi-decade  
 12 experience in shared governance.  
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 15 **What do you take away as the single most**  
 16 **important message you have heard at the**  
 17 **conference?**  
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19 It is important to develop a strategy to engage and retain faculty, staff,  
 20 and students in a process of shared governance, and to bring governance  
 21 members together with administrators who see the benefits of shared  
 22 governance.  
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 25 **Align Individual and Governance Goals**  
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27 In order to encourage faculty, staff, and students to get involved in shared  
 28 governance, it is necessary to demonstrate that many of their personal  
 29 and professional goals and aims have a direct connection to the current  
 30 and long-term goals of the governance organization. Governance bodies  
 31 are generally composed of working committees that focus on different  
 32 campus functions (e.g., budget, curriculum, academic standing, promotion  
 33 and tenure, student life). Many campus individuals (faculty, staff,  
 34 and students) have interests, knowledge, and experience in areas in which  
 35 these committees operate. Governance bodies need to identify and then  
 36 recruit these individuals. Outreach to them should be individualized and  
 37 emphasize the fact that their involvement in these committees will not only  
 38 be useful to a well-functioning campus, but to meeting their own goals  
 39 as well. For one example, faculty, staff, and students who are interested  
 40 in the details of the academic programs that will be required of students  
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should be encouraged to get involved in the campus' curriculum committee. Participation of interested and knowledgeable people enhance the expertise of the committee and serve the campus as well.

For administrators, it is necessary to demonstrate that there are faculty and staff (and, in some cases, students) who have the relevant knowledge, expertise, and experience that is useful in the development of university policy and programs. Consequently, their involvement can contribute to policies and programs that would be better with their participation than without it. Equally important is the consideration of the implementation of new policies and programs. Generally, faculty and staff are charged with the responsibility of carrying out new policies and programs. Therefore, their involvement in establishing these policies and programs will increase the likelihood of the acceptance of them by faculty and staff—and also lead to a greater commitment by these groups to making them work successfully.

**Agree on a Reasonable Timeframe for Governance Action**

This is an important issue for faculty, staff, and students as well as administrators. There needs to be an agreement of a reasonable amount of time to devote to an issue to bring it to some measure of conclusion. Most faculty, staff, and students need to see some “light at the end of the tunnel”—that is, the possibility of obtaining a sense of accomplishment for a task completed that is generally measured by a semester or academic year. Beyond that, many (and most especially students, whose involvement with the campus is generally of a much shorter duration than most faculty and staff) will lose momentum—and possibly interest—for working on a specific governance activity. Also, change in governance leadership and committee membership from one year to the next can create difficulties in moving some activities forward.

On the other hand, administrators are often responsible for making decisions rather rapidly. Due to pressure from above, or from general administrative schedules, their timeframe for action is generally shorter than those for faculty and staff. Consequently, from their point of view, speed of action is desired in a matter of weeks or months rather than semesters or academic years. Thus, there needs to be an early discussion and a clear agreement on a timeframe for any necessary governance action. The conclusion reached regarding the deadline for action needs (to the extent possible) to fit the time requirements of the administrators as well

1 as to take into consideration input from the governance body. Governance  
 2 leaders need to determine an appropriate amount of time that would be  
 3 adequate to consider the action involved. Ideally, consensus between the  
 4 administration and the governance body should be reached before there  
 5 is a commitment to work on the activity involved.

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### 8 **Establish Clear “Rules of Engagement” for Those Involved in** 9 **Governance Activities**

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11 If faculty, staff, and students are to be encouraged to play a role in gover-  
 12 nance activities, they need to know exactly what will be required of them.

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14 • Perhaps the most important requirement is time. They need to  
 15 know the time commitment that they are being asked to make  
 16 in advance of actually making that commitment to serve.

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18 ○ Specifically, they need to be informed of how many meet-  
 19 ings are required, and on what schedule (weekly, biweekly,  
 20 monthly).

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22 ○ They should be informed of the overall timeline of the effort,  
 23 as well as any expectations that they will be asked to con-  
 24 tribute during times when classes are not in session.

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25 ○ They need to clearly understand what will be required of  
 26 them between meetings.

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27 • They also need to be given some sense of the *actual activities*  
 28 that are likely to be required of them if they join a particular  
 29 governance activity.

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31 ○ For example, will they be asked to obtain and analyze rel-  
 32 evant documents?

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33 ○ Will they need to interview campus officials, members of  
 34 other campus constituencies, or contact other institutions?

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36 ○ Will they be required to provide oral and/or written reports  
 37 of their work to the committee?

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39 Sharing this information, along with a clear charge for the work to be  
 40 accomplished, can go a long way toward involving people who know

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what they are getting into prior to agreeing to serve. Consequently, any potential resentment about the scope of their obligations can be greatly minimized and accomplishments can be maximized.

**Close the Loop**

It is important for all parties to review the results of the action(s) agreed on through shared governance. Following up the results of a new policy or program after a reasonable period of time will allow parties to assess if the results expected from their collaboration has in fact occurred. In effect, this follow-up is similar to “midcourse corrections” that are typical in space flights. Similarly, it has become routine that when a new computer program is developed and put into practice, “bug fixes,” or necessary adjustments, are expected. A similar practice is often useful in following up on actions taken through shared governance since the establishment of new policies or program may well have unanticipated results for which adjustments will be necessary.

This follow-up is also essential to give faculty, staff, and students a sense that their efforts have had some consequence. Too often, faculty, staff, and students do not have any evidence that the time, thought, and effort that they put into a shared governance project have had any effect. If they conclude that their contributions were negligible or ignored, they are less likely to continue participating in shared governance. It is far better to illustrate to them that their participation was consequential so that they will continue to be engaged in shared governance and to encourage their colleagues to become involved as well. Showing the continued viability of their work serves this purpose.

**Looking forward to the future of shared governance: How can—or should—it be best achieved as universities continue to evolve in the first part of the 21st century?**

**Engender Trust and Mutual Respect**

The answer to this question was best approached by two key leaders of SUNY: H. Carl McCall, the chairman of the SUNY Board of Trustees, and Nancy Zimpher, the chancellor of the State University of New York. In

1 his remarks opening the conference, McCall said that “shared governance  
2 is not a part of corporate or military organizations, but it is an essential  
3 part of institutions of higher education.” He emphasized the importance  
4 of trust and mutual respect on the part of various constituencies of the  
5 university. Zimpher, for her part, emphasized the importance of collabora-  
6 tion among the various stakeholders of institutions of higher education.  
7 She linked this directly to McCall’s point about the importance of trust  
8 by stating that “collaboration moves at the speed of trust.”

9 Trust and mutual respect are essential. Administrators differ from fac-  
10 ulty, staff, and students in terms of their roles and sets of responsibilities  
11 within the institution. It is an article of faith in my discipline of sociol-  
12 ogy that people who occupy a different status and play a different role  
13 perceive and interpret things differently. This may result in the members  
14 of each group having different goals for the organization or believing in  
15 different means to attain even agreed-upon common goals. Their percep-  
16 tions of a situation differ and, thus, the actions that they see as necessary  
17 will also likely differ.

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20 **Take into Account the Fact That There Are Different Conceptions of**  
21 **the University—Collegial and Bureaucratic**

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23 Part of the difference between administrators and faculty is rooted in  
24 the fact that, in general, faculty (and, to some extent, staff and students)  
25 tend to see the university as a “collegial” institution. Collegial refers to  
26 “colleagues [who] are . . . explicitly united in a common purpose and  
27 respecting each other’s abilities to work toward that purpose [Wikiped-  
28 ia] . . . [and] relating to or involving shared responsibility, as among a  
29 group of colleagues” [Oxford Dictionaries].

30 Administrators, on the other hand, tend to view the university as a  
31 bureaucratic organization. This view stresses (1) the importance of hierar-  
32 chical authority in decision making, (2) following a set of relatively rigid  
33 and consistent rules, and (3) the necessity of maintaining formal written  
34 documentation of actions.

35 These different perceptions of the nature of the university, and the  
36 different roles that administrators, faculty, staff, and students play in it,  
37 are often the basis of some of the difficulties of their cooperating in shared  
38 governance. This is why trust and mutual respect—based on in-depth  
39 understanding of and empathy for the “other”—are essential.

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**Be Empathic**

To work together effectively, each group must be able to “take the role of the other” (to be empathic) in order to understand how their partners in a shared venture see the situation. To be empathic doesn’t necessarily require agreement with the other; it does, however, involve understanding that the different perceptions and interpretations of the other need to be taken into account in order to arrive at a common agreement on any issue at hand. Mutual understanding is an essential element in arriving at a compromise that respects the core views and responsibilities of each of the participants.

Years ago, I had an idea that I thought might well increase understanding, empathy, and trust among faculty and administrators. I suggested to a previous campus president that a mutually beneficial policy to this end could be established by the practice of routinely appointing several faculty who had recently received tenure to a short-term (2 to 3 years) administrative assignment (e.g., Assistant Dean, Assistant Provost, Assistant Vice President). There could be several benefits as a result: (1) This experience could allow these faculty to better understand the administrative perspective and responsibilities, including the limitations on administrators; many faculty are generally unaware that there constraints on administrators as a consequence of state and federal regulations as well as system policies; (2) at the same time, rotating faculty into short-term administrative assignments would ensure that administrators have ongoing contact with these faculty whose perceptions might well differ from theirs; (3) the result of such a program might well provide the opportunity for administrators and faculty to better understand the role of the other, which would facilitate their ability to make the necessary compromises that are at the heart of collaborative action; and (4) it might serve to recruit faculty to extended administrative assignments.

**Ensure Transparency**

Another element that was identified as important for shared governance in today’s world was the issue of transparency. The lack of transparency breeds suspicion and can undermine any effort for fruitful collaboration. It also hinders effective collective action.

Transparency is important so that governance members not only believe that they have all the necessary information to be able to play a



1 significant and knowledgeable role in an activity of shared governance,  
2 but that is in fact the case. This is especially important for faculty, staff,  
3 and students, whose involvement in governance is understood to be advi-  
4 sory and not determinative. As an example of required transparency, if  
5 faculty, staff, and students are to participate in a proposal to create a  
6 new academic department/school/college, they need to know the resources  
7 (human, financial, capital) that will be devoted to the new venture, where  
8 those resources are coming from, and what effect the establishment of  
9 this unit will have on other elements of the campus. Ideally, all of the  
10 participants in this shared governance process would agree that transpar-  
11 ency has the potential for beneficial outcomes and would, consequently,  
12 be less reluctant to share all necessary information.

### 13 14 15 **Concluding Comments** 16

17 One of the lessons learned from the various presentations at this confer-  
18 ence is that though faculty, staff, and students are only “advisory” in  
19 the governance of the university, they do have significant leverage to  
20 influence policy and actions. Their knowledge and expertise—as well as  
21 their necessary involvement in carrying out policies and programs—give  
22 them persuasive influence if not actual power in determining university  
23 policies and programs.

24 Equally important, working together through a process of shared gov-  
25 ernance often results in each of the campus constituencies developing a  
26 much more nuanced view of each other than they originally had—with  
27 greater potential to increase trust and mutual respect. This more nuanced  
28 view of the other will make it more likely that the different perspectives,  
29 skills, and experience of the participants will be considered seriously. Con-  
30 sequently, it can facilitate necessary collaboration that is more likely to  
31 produce a satisfying result that generally will engender greater acceptance  
32 of new programs and policies by the various campus constituencies.

33 Finally, a cautionary note: The success of this conference was a result  
34 of numerous examples of shared governance on particular campuses that  
35 could be seen as potential models elsewhere. However, the conference  
36 had the feel of “preaching to the choir.” Frequent stumbling blocks to  
37 shared governance are administrators who do not necessarily value the  
38 input of faculty, staff, or students in developing campus policies and pro-  
39 grams. Rather, they tend to see shared governance as an intrusion on their  
40 authority. The success of future conferences on shared governance will  
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require the involvement of administrators who are not adequately convinced that they need to seriously include these other constituencies in the establishment of campus policies and programs. These individuals—who might automatically dismiss the value of attending such a conference—are the very people who need exposure to the positive effects of shared governance that was evident in the various sessions of this conference. Had they attended, they might have been surprised by the level of overt support for shared governance by the SUNY leadership—the chairman of the SUNY Board of Trustees and the SUNY chancellor, both of whom have espoused and practiced shared governance, as well as some of their fellow administrators—to make the campuses of SUNY the kind of collegial organization that should be the hallmark of institutions of higher education. In the future, it is hoped that the leadership of SUNY would use their persuasive abilities to increase the number of administrative participants to this conference.

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