The Danger of Deference: A Case of Polite Governance

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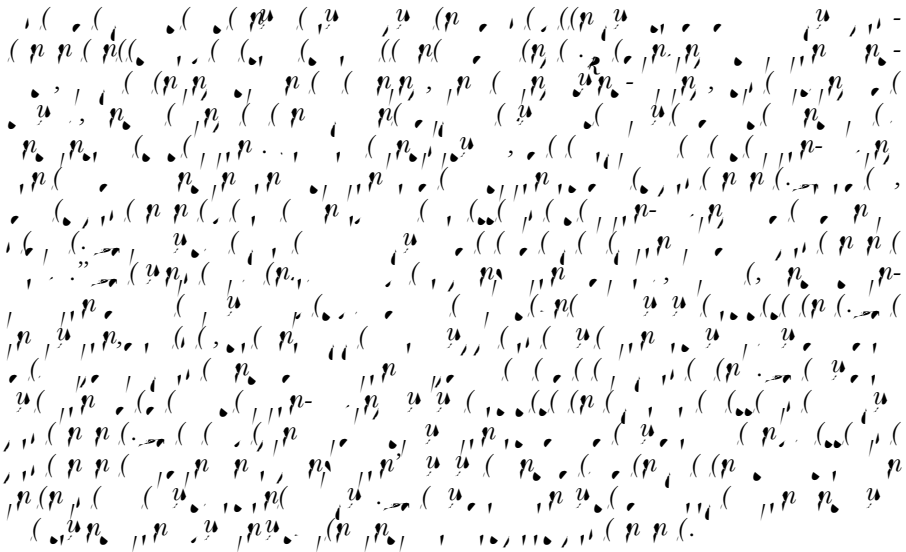
Over the past decade numerous arguments have been put forth that campus governance needs to be revised to meet new challenges (i.e., Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1996). Rethinking admission standards, implementing distance learning, increasing fund-raising, diversifying the faculty, and creating external partnerships are just a few

This article examines the use of cultural perspectives for assessing the quality of university governance. The authors argue that outcomes are more useful indicators of effective governance rather than the amiability of campus constituents.

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Many definitions of shared governance work from a rationalist framework. The rationalist frame is built on four basic assumptions that shape the nature of an organization's reality. First, rationalists assume that the organization is a reified entity that can be understood. Second, rationalists argue that an organization functions effectively through manifest meanings; all participants are able to interpret the organization in a similar manner. Third, they suggest that insofar as it is possible to codify abstract realities, one can then create generalizable rules for governance. Fourth, they assume that since rules for effective governance exist, organizational life can be predictable (Tierney, 1987).

Rationalist beliefs circumscribe organizational life and have important implications for the manner in which one thinks about and participates in shared governance. If an organization "exists" as an entity then the manner in which one tries to create change is through structural reconfigurations.

The concern with a rationalist frame of shared governance is particularly germane insofar as a great deal of discontent is voiced about the short-comings of shared governance (Amacher & Meiners, 2002; AGB, 1996). From a rationalist perspective the structures of decision-making have become inadequate for the fast-paced needs of the 21st century. What needs to be done is to overhaul the structures of decision-making. The critics' con-

an institution becomes manifest in the processes, dialogues, and symbols of the organization. In addition to considering structural reforms, it is im-

gain diverse perspectives on governance. To enhance trustworthiness we conducted hour-long interviews with campus members who represented a cross-section of perspectives and vantage points on governance (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Interviewees included the president, provost, leaders of the university Assembly (the formal faculty governing body), deans, junior and

As one might imagine, the new schools have encountered resistance in their pursuits because many university constituents hold fast to the historical emphasis on liberal education.

Traditionally, the nature of faculty work at PU involves teaching up to six courses a year, service, and, to a lesser degree, research. Teaching is viewed as the cornerstone of faculty work. Service is viewed as a critical component of the culture and is necessary to secure tenure. "Service is a must for getting tenure here. There is a strong expectation that you should be involved, and people know who you are," one faculty member explained. "We don't want new professors to be preoccupied with service," added a second person, "but we always make sure they're on some committees so they get known, get to know the place." "I'd tell a new hire don't shirk your service," added another. "We talk about service mattering," summarized a fourth person. "You need to get involved beyond your department."

Over the past decade faculty work has increasingly involved research as the institution attempts to grow and compete with peer institutions for prestige and constituent advantage. This new direction is expressed most visibly in the recently revised faculty handbook. "In the last few years there has been an apparent emphasis placed on conducting research. This will change the nature of faculty work and modify what faculty spend their time doing" stated a faculty member of 32 years. "Research is now more important," added another, "but it's still a distant third in terms of priorities."

Service to the university seems to have been embedded in the culture, in part because of the small-town flavor of the surrounding town. However, the town has grown and is now less of a "small town." There is also an increase in faculty who live outside of the local community. "Fewer people live here," bemoaned one individual. "People used to be on campus all the time. It was expected, but now people live further away and don't come as much." An additional person explained, "Two-career marriages make living here difficult. So people commute here to work, and it's changed the place some."

For some, the move away from the local community has meant a weakening of the academic community. "People are less willing to get involved because when they come here their day is packed," stated one person. A second added, "It's understandable. It's happening everywhere. But we just have less time." "Email has replaced face-to-face," opined a -235.6(everywoc62nlm)]

Over the past decade PU has experienced minimal growth in the popu-

help raise money. The senior administration—the president in particular—represent the locus of authority on the campus. The faculty voice is represented mainly through the University Assembly but essentially it exists as an advisory body. Decision-making authority is freely granted to the president and there are few occasions where differing opinions are represented formally.

When asked about whether they had a good governance structure, the participants generally agreed based on deferential relations. Individuals' comments painted the picture of effective decision-making but did not clearly delineate what good governance meant other than that people agreed with one another: ''Yes, governance works here. Everyone gets along,'' said one person. A second added, ''Governance is always dicey on any campus, but the faculty respect the president and the vice president, so it's pretty good, yes.'' A third noted, ''It hasn't always been good, but for a very long time we've cooperated with one another. This president's administration has focused on good relations with the faculty.'' And a fourth person summarized, ''Governance succeeds when faculty and administration work together. That's what we've got.'' Thus, the members defined governance not by outcomes, such as an increase in quality. Instead, good governance meant the faculty and administration enjoyed cordial relations with one another.

DECISION MAKING AT PU

Every summer after commencement the president takes the vice presidents and deans away on a 2-day retreat to evaluate the past year and to plan for the upcoming year. ''During this time I ask each of them to really think about where we are and how we can improve,'' said the president. By July each of the deans and vice presidents are asked to submit written ideas about the direction of campus. ''During that process I ask them to talk about their ideas informally to different people across the campus,'' the president further explained. In August the group meets again to present ideas and compile a plan that will guide the campus. ''Afterwards any faculty member or board member can call me and comment on the plan,'' said the president. The plan is published in October and serves as the administrative agenda for the year.

One person commented on the process by noting:

There is a veneer of decision-making on the part of the faculty. We're told a certain number of positions exist, and we can then decide with the provost what we should do. But that's a predetermined decision. Who's to say that we can only hire three new faculty this year? Other decisions lead into that one, but we're not involved in those. It's like

the table is set and we get to choose where we want to sit. But who decided to set the table with that many chairs?

Other individuals also commented that faculty participation "was not as significant" as they'd like and that "the president has broad authority," but individuals appeared content. The portrait was neither of an individual who governed through intimidation nor a faculty that was disengaged. Rather, individuals were content with the direction the institution because they largely trusted the president and his staff even though some might have desired a bit more influence. "He has developed a reservoir of support through the years," said one person. "It's not hero worship," said another, "It's just that we understand the system and it appears to work. What's the problem?"

The creation of two new schools and the revisions to the faculty handbook were the most frequently mentioned recent changes. Both initiatives came from the administration. When asked about the faculty's role in creating or rejecting major initiatives one professor responded: "Minutes ago in the Assembly meeting, we were just verbally contemplating the issue of how much power we actually have. The problem I saw was that few Assembly members could answer the question."

"The plan to create the schools of education and business were fashioned before the faculty were asked about it," one professor stated. The process of decision-making at PU involved what one Assembly member called "selective consolation" by the president. The decision to create the new schools was announced by the administration. Many faculty members recalled that announcement as the first time they had heard of the restructuring. When asked about the faculty's response to the decision to create two new schools, an education professor explained that "there was not much reaction to the decision. The faculty just went about doing the work of getting it done without having much to say." A former dean recalled: "The faculty in many of the programs that would be moved into one of the schools were not even consulted during the process of decision-making." Yet when asked about the decision to create the schools of business and education, once again many faculty expressed satisfaction and concern but did not mention disappointment with the process of decision-making. A business professor remarked:

The president has a good track record with the faculty, and most people trust him to do the right thing. Some people had questions about creating new schools but those voices were so faint that the administration didn't hear them. I would say that people are just accustomed to the president making decisions. Most faculty don't really

seem to mind and the few willing to challenge him recognize that they

In spite of widespread satisfaction with governance many faculty were of the opinion that they did not have "real" power. "The faculty, at best, serves an advisory capacity and most people seem to be OK with that" one English professor stated. When asked about his relationship with the faculty, the president stated that "there's almost too much trust. I can set pretty strong agendas. People give me the liberty and will to do so." He then stated that "it's nice to be liked but it's more important to be respected and trusted."

A recent newcomer to the campus summarized the pervasive culture of deference by saying:

> There is a structure that allows for dialogue but the president is so well liked that faculty defer their will and rights to him. It's an enormous display of trust. I've been here for two years and have been amazed at how central the decision-making is and even more amazed at how satisfied the faculty are with this kind of structure.

QUALITY: NEW CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

The challenges and changing environment facing PU likely will create a significantly different decision-making context from what currently exists. Almost 40% of the PU faculty, for example, will be eligible for retirement within six years. At the same time, the schools of education and business expect to undertake significant recruitment. The assistant to the provost explained:

> We are really concerned about what our faculty will look like in the near future. With the changes to the university there is a concern that new faculty will care less about teaching and more about research and won't be concerned the least bit about service.

There are also concerns about socializing new faculty in the ways of PU according to a professor of philosophy and member of the campus for 15 years:

> I fear that the faculty will turn over at such a rate that we won't be able to acculturate them or subject them to the type of social pressure to serve the way we once could. When I first got here there was an unspoken rule that to be a member of the community you had to be involved with the work of the campus. That's how you gained your acceptance. As we look to expand I don't think that we'll be able to leverage that kind of pressure.

In addition to faculty turnover, concerns about a changing student population exist. Not only is PU expected to increase its traditional student population, it also intends to increase enrollment among professional students, which means holding classes at night and possibly on-line. ''We were one kind of campus,'' said one individual, ''and now we're becoming another.'' Another summarized: ''You can't stay stuck in the past. But I hope as we get new students, new faculty, a new president and administration, there's still some of what makes us 'us' left.''

and civility are important precepts of sound governance (Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Indeed, distrust is often associated with failed governance systems. Pleasant University, in many ways, is a model campus for communication and trust between campus constituents. One professor proclaimed: ''I guess we are more efficiently run as a result of the president's ability to make decisions and our trust that he'll do the right thing.'' Common sense suggests that fundamental trust and civility among mem-

A rare faculty disagreement with the decision of the president provided the campus with a glimpse of the current strengths of their culture and the potential dangers of deference. On the one hand, the president was able to implement an idea without a faculty vote because they trusted him. On the other hand, over the past decade PU has experienced few decisions that create disparate positions. Some governance scholars have mistakenly assumed that a productive organizational culture is one where individuals agree with one another, as if cultures are communicative entities in which individuals interpret actions from a similar perspective. We suggest that inclusive decision-making structures that are based on trust in individuals and trust in an established process need also to legitimize contentious decision-making.

Our point is delicate; we are not suggesting that an organization's culture should be one that is distrustful. However, the opposite is also incorrect. Simply because everyone trusts a long-time leader does not ensure organizational quality. From this perspective, is PU well situated for the future? They have the conditions for quality to arise insofar as the culture is one of trust. Rather than focus on rationalistic changes that are sure to occur—the retirement of the president, and the like—we are suggesting that the organization's participants will be well served if they concentrate on cultural values and how discussions about values might enable the promulgation of quality.

Consonant with the issue of decision-making culture is faculty responsibility. Two instances of important decision making at PU were assigned to the faculty. The revising of the faculty handbook and changing the interim session were both issues originally sent to the Assembly for faculty to decide. In both cases the PU faculty admit to being unable to forward a resolution. "The faculty fumbled around with the [handbook]" said one member of the Assembly. Another commenting on the interim session stated that "the faculty could not make any decision... Finally the president decided for them." In the interest of promoting cultural values that ensure institutional quality, faculty are obligated to assume responsibility for making informed and timely decisions. The inability to do so can silence faculty voice in decision making and further compromise institutional quality.

CONCLUSION

We have argued here that a rationalist framework assumes reality as objective and understood whereas a cultural frame assumes that organizational reality is created. While such a comment is not surprising, we then pointed out that the implications for governance are quite different. The rationalist assumes that structures exist that can be improved to create more

efficient and effective decisions, whereas proponents of a cultural approach suggest that governance exists through the communicative and symbolic processes of the organization. We then suggested that trust among individual campus constituents provides the scaffolding for effective systems of governance, but that trust alone is an insufficient variable to increase organizational quality. Trust is a process rather than an end.

The case of PU highlights the dilemma of deference. The president at PU is of the opinion that the faculty trust him too much. This, in some ways, signifies not so much an abandonment of faculty responsibility, but the danger of a culture where trust is seen as an end in and of itself. Neither the president nor the administration was characterized as autocratic. Instead, a culture has been created where ''getting along'' has been at a premium. Our concern is not that trust is useless, but rather that, in a time of change, organizations need to develop cultures that have the expectation of improving quality. In order to improve quality, individuals need to create and sustain ways to effectively engage one another about what the institution's goals are and how to reach them.

Campuses with deferential systems of governance might examine the expectations of the faculty. Although the PU faculty were service oriented, their service involved carrying out decisions of the administration. Faculty more meaningfully involved in decision-making might likely assert themselves as responsive partners in campus governance rather than as workers.

Governance needs to be more aimed at improving organizational quality than with placating constituencies. The case of Pleasant University serves as

often discuss structure to the exclusion of culture or vice versa. Although our focus here is on culture we do not intend to suggest that structure does not matter. Instead the two (culture and structure) should reflect one an-

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