

ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNING BOARDS OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

WHAT BOARD MEMBERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

FACULTY



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Dramatic changes are looming in higher education, and individual institutions need to adapt in order not just to survive, but to thrive.

This kind of change requires input and support from leaders across the campus—especially the board, the president, and the faculty. In American colleges and universities, this collaboration takes a unique form of institutional leadership called *shared governance*. When done well, shared governance yields informed and inclusive discussion, thoughtful and comprehensive analysis, and collective and efficient decision making. In this leadership construct, however, the board and the faculty may find themselves at odds. Sometimes, they do not understand each other. Other times, they do not agree with each other. Regardless, their paths will continue to intersect. The challenge is to make these intersections productive and positive so as to advance the greater good of the college or university.

In order to engage effectively in shared governance with the president and the faculty, board members need to understand who the faculty are, what they do, how they are organized, and when they should be involved in institutional leadership and governance. This briefing paper offers an overview of the role that the faculty plays in their institutions, important features of their work lives—including shared governance, academic freedom, tenure, faculty governing bodies, and, at some institutions, unions—and changes taking place on campus to help board members better understand their counterparts in shared governance.

Understanding the World of Academe

In our era of vocal—sometimes even strident—public pressure for more and better-prepared college graduates and more-affordable degrees, board responsibility for the proper functioning and advancement of their institutions appropriately involves oversight of the quality of academic programs. While responsibility for important educational matters—such as the curriculum, program development, teaching, and assessment of student learning—is typically delegated to the faculty, boards are best supported in their oversight role if they understand these faculty responsibilities. Indeed, board members’ understanding of the multifaceted nature of faculty work and the academic environment is a prerequisite to fulfilling the board’s governance responsibility.

Academic culture can seem foreign to board members whose professional lives are spent in environments very different from those of a college or university. Success in academe is often determined by the intellectual impact on others, rather than the growth of a financial bottom line. Most academic decision making is shared, not hierarchical. While colleges and universities are governed by boards and managed by administrators, their missions cannot be achieved without faculty. The faculty is the connective tissue of the academy.

It is the job of the president and chief academic officer to ensure that board members understand the culture of the academy at large, as well as the particular culture of their college or university. Some business-minded board members—many of whom work in the corporate sector in areas such as finance, law, and real estate, among others—may find it difficult to identify with the world of academe where:

1. Leadership is shared. The institution has a volunteer governing board, a professional administration led by a president (selected and appointed by the governing board), and a faculty senate (or similar governance structure), as well as a student government. While the board is ultimately accountable for the institution, in well-functioning colleges and universities, many critical decisions are made with contributions from a multitude of voices, including those of the faculty.
2. Historically, faculty have played the primary role in deciding what is taught (the curriculum), who is taught (what students are admitted), and who teaches (what academic credentials, training, and experience are required of new faculty). They are education professionals and subject-matter experts in their fields.
3. Tenure “remains important and viable,” according to 70 percent of provosts surveyed by *Inside Higher Ed* in 2013, although it covers a declining proportion of all faculty. Traditionally, after tenure is awarded, full-time faculty members have had lifelong job security, with a few limitations, by virtue of the tenure system.

In the 21st century, enlightened companies and organizations have realized that leadership is truly shared. Similarly, while the college or university governing board has the ultimate fiduciary responsibility, it must work closely with the president, administrators, and faculty to advance their institutions’ missions, especially in an environment in which change is the most common feature. Indeed, an enlightened board will rely heavily on a responsible faculty not just to carry out the core functions of teaching, research, and service, but also to contribute to such critical activities as institutional strategic planning and budgeting, all within an environment of shared governance.

An Introduction to Shared Governance

Shared governance is the academy’s form of an equity stake in the college or university—an expression of ownership in the best sense of the word. The board, the administration, and the faculty *share* responsibility for governing the institution. While the term *shared governance* is common in higher education, the concept of engagement of internal stakeholders in shaping institutional direction is increasingly common in other settings as well (for example, employees as shareholders). In colleges and universities, boards have full authority and accountability for their institutions, but tradition and good practice have created appropriate space for faculty participation in governance.

The Value of Shared Governance

“Shared governance serves a number of purposes: It involves the board, president, and faculty working together to make important institutional decisions. It acknowledges the professionalism of the faculty. It provides each group with primary authority over its areas of expertise and a voice in decisions affecting the programs, organization, and traditions of the institution.”

Source: Rita Bornstein. “Transforming Institutions Through Shared Governance.” *Trusteeship*, September/October 2012. 24-30.

Board and faculty members have shared interests and responsibilities for issues ranging from student learning to student conduct, from campus safety to intercollegiate athletics, and from budgets to institutional restructuring. Sharing responsibilities is rarely a simple or linear process, but such leadership can produce superior results. For instance, consider the following successful examples:

- The president of a research university was concerned that the faculty had too narrowly defined research productivity and wanted to broaden the concept of scholarship at the institution. Intrigued, the president and chair of the faculty senate created a campus-wide Commission on Scholarship that kicked off a discussion about scholarship, research, and the value of different types of faculty work.

As a result, the university revised its tenure and promotion policies with support from the board, faculty, and administration.

- The faculty of a small college convinced the administration that the institution should broaden its benefits to cover same-sex partners. The president brought the issue to the board, citing strong reasons for making this change. The board, while not opposed, was concerned about negative reactions from the community. Additional input from the faculty helped make the case, and the board approved the change.
- A major restructuring initiative was launched at a private research university with participation from faculty, staff, and administration. Campus committees made

Shared Governance, Delegated Authority, and Participatory Deliberations

The ultimate responsibility for governance of the institution (or system) rests in its governing board. But, boards delegate to the president abundant authority to manage the operations of the institution. Moreover, the meaningful involvement of faculty and other campus constituencies in deliberations contributes to effective institutional governance. For example:

- The board should collaborate with the president, senior leadership team, and faculty leaders to arrive at an understanding concerning strategic direction.
- The delegation of authority to the administration and faculty for adding, reducing, or discontinuing academic programs is made with the understanding that the board retains the ultimate responsibility for approving such actions.
- If the board decides the institution is in such financial jeopardy that faculty and staff reductions and reallocations are necessary, it first should consult, through the president, with constituent groups, then share appropriate information and describe the analysis that led it to such a determination.
- Full-time faculty will have a primary role in decisions concerning academic programs and faculty personnel matters, but the board is responsible for establishing the rules by which these voices are heard and their perspectives considered.

Adapted from **AGB Statement on Board Responsibility for Institutional Governance** (AGB 2010).

recommendations regarding almost every aspect of the university. Reports that explained where money was coming from and how it was being spent were shared with everyone. All members of the campus community had an opportunity to respond to a rough draft of the restructuring plan. When the final plan was presented to and approved by the board, it was widely accepted and supported.

As evidenced by these examples, shared governance enables colleges and universities to tackle complex issues in an inclusive, collaborative, transparent, and effective way. The board, the administration, and the faculty leadership have responsibilities for ensuring that important issues receive the appropriate input and debate from all stakeholders, while also ensuring that recommendations and decisions are made in a timely fashion, especially as the pace of change continues to increase.

At times, shared governance may frustrate trustees because faculty members are accustomed to acting in a deliberative manner—during the academic year—and generally distrust rapid change, preferring instead incremental processes. Yet the faculty role in shared governance can also be constructive in restraining untested managerial enthusiasms—for new programs, changed hiring policies, new admissions policies, and the like. At its worst, shared governance can interfere with risk management by delaying the approval of policies necessary to allow the institution to comply with a new federal or state mandate (say, regarding non-discrimination or protection of human research subjects) and thus increase the institution's legal liability.

Several contemporary trends affect shared governance, including the declining number of full-time faculty members available for institutional service; the growing roles of administrative staff in such areas as admissions and curriculum design; and heightened board

attention to positioning their institutions to operate effectively in a period of economic uncertainty, shifting enrollment and employment, and technological advances.

A Snapshot of the Professoriate

Faculty members are a college or university's primary continuing asset. Excellence in faculty recruitment, retention, and advancement is essential to achieving institutional goals. Faculty members directly affect student learning and outcomes, generate grant support and conduct research, develop and disseminate knowledge, and lead academic departments and programs. The caliber of faculty members, who must not only establish themselves as experts in their respective fields but also stay current in disciplinary advances and in teaching methodologies, brings cachet to the institution's brand and image in the marketplace of ideas and institutions.

It is crucial that board members also realize that the professoriate is changing in several ways, with far-reaching ramifications. Perhaps most importantly, at many institutions, large numbers of faculty members are no longer full-time employees of the institution, raising questions regarding such issues as educational quality, service to the institution beyond teaching and research, and fair treatment of different categories of faculty.