

What Is Shared Governance Anyway?

Shared governance is an ideal to which many seem eager to express allegiance. In fact, shared governance is invoked almost as frequently by administrators and administrator-dominated organizations such as the regional accrediting commissions as it is by faculty and faculty groups such as the AAUP. As with many catchphrases, however, shared governance apparently means different things to different people.

All too often shared governance is used to convey the idea that a lot of conversation ought to take place within and among various campus groups—board, administration, faculty, staff, students, etc.—before the people in power make the final decision. This conception might be labeled the “stakeholder” version of shared governance. All the stakeholders should have a place at the table; everybody, within reason, should be consulted. Once people have talked things over, those in charge make the final decision, presumably after having given serious consideration to the full range of opinions and recommendations. Because “input” is sought and wide communication takes place, governance is said to be shared.

This understanding of shared governance incorporates two suppositions: (1) when it comes to important issues, final decision-making power belongs to the president, and (2) all subordinate campus constituents are pretty much equal, regardless of function and expertise (the insidious implication of the term “stakeholder”).

This brand of shared governance, which resembles corporate quality-improvement programs like Total Quality Management (TQM), is certainly preferable to tyranny or dictatorship. In fact, on many campuses—especially those on which presidents routinely make decisions without consulting anybody—the implementation of the stakeholder understanding of shared governance would constitute a great leap forward.

Nevertheless, the stakeholder notion of shared governance falls well short of the classic conception articulated in the 1966 *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*—the urtext of academic governance. (The full statement is available at <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/governancestatement.htm>.) Jointly formulated by the Association of Governing Boards of American Colleges and Universities (AGB), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the AAUP, the *Statement on Government* conveys a more sophisticated—and collegial—understanding of academic shared governance.

Even though the *Statement on Government* recognizes that final institutional authority resides ultimately in the governing board and that the board entrusts day-to-day administration to the president, it does not conceive of the college or university in starkly hierarchical terms—as a power pyramid with the president and board situated at the apex. On the contrary, it portrays the well-run institution as one in which board and president delegate decision-making power to the faculty.

What chiefly distinguishes the classic understanding of shared governance from the stakeholder variety is the idea that the faculty not only possess the right to be heard in institutional decision-making; they actually possess “primary responsibility”—or authority—for reaching decisions in their areas of expertise, namely, “curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process.”

The delegation of primary responsibility to faculty in academic matters is founded upon the assumption that faculty are not merely employees, but professionals with special training and knowledge, and thus distinctly qualified to exercise decision-making authority in their areas of expertise. “Decisions not to reappoint, promotions, the granting of tenure, and dismissal,” for example, are the “primary responsibility of the faculty” because the faculty’s “judgment is central to general educational policy”

and because “scholars in a particular field or activity have the chief competence for judging the work of their colleagues.”

While the stakeholder conception of shared governance affords equal weight in all realms of decision-making to every voice save that of the president, the classic conception of shared governance grants some voices more weight than others, depending on the type of decision. Thus, even though the president and board may possess final authority, the *Statement on Government* asserts that they should routinely concur with faculty recommendations made in areas of faculty responsibility and that they should reject faculty decisions in those areas only in “rare instances and for compelling reasons which should be stated in detail.” In short, when it comes to academic matters, a faculty decision should normally be the final decision.

Primary responsibility also implies that faculty enjoy a certain degree of decision-making autonomy in their areas of expertise—in other words, that the administration maintains a hands-off policy when the faculty are developing recommendations in the areas of curriculum, academic policy, and appointment, reappointment, tenure, and promotion.

By assigning primary authority in educational matters to the faculty, genuine shared governance, as articulated in the *Statement on Government*, promotes and sustains academic excellence. It doesn’t take a doctorate in higher education to figure out why. In the plain words of one of the twentieth century’s great university presidents, “we get the best results in education and research if we leave their management to people who know something about them” (Robert Maynard Hutchins, *Higher Learning in America*, Yale, 1936, p. 21).

June 2007