

# A Case of Complex Governance

*A Structural Analysis of University Decision Making*

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**Abstract:** *Recent studies of university governance focus on cultural elements of decision-making processes. However, structural aspects of university organization are equally important for effective governance. Using an adaptation of rational decision-making theory, I consider the effectiveness of university governance structures. Through the use of a case study of a large public research university, I analyze how the structural configuration of universities potentially influences the quality of governance and decision making. In addition, I discuss reconciling cultural and structural aspects of governance, eliminating spurious governing bodies, and reframing governance reform as ways to improve the effectiveness of university governance.*

Some scholars suggest that the future of higher education depends on the capacity of universities to transform the way that they are organized to make decisions critical to institutional vitality (Collis, 2001; Eckel, 2000; Longin, 2002). Yet colleges and universities employ governance structures as diverse as the population of institutions themselves. The configuration of governing boards, campus administrators, and faculty senates can vary significantly from campus to campus (Van Grinkel, 2001).

Scholarship on academic governance promotes the purported virtues of effective governance systems. For example, many in higher education believe that the concept of shared governance should be upheld as an institutional value (Burgan, 1998; Tierney & Minor, 2003). Others believe that governance systems void of legitimacy or trust are problematic (Scott, 1996; Sitkin & Stickel, 1995). Benjamin and Carroll (1999) suggest that effective governance systems are open, participatory, collaborative, and contextual. However, universities have distinctly different goals and are uniquely situated in various decision-making contexts; making sweeping declarations about what constitutes effective governance likely yields overgeneralized observations.

Governance theory, from a phenomenological perspective, provides explanations of how university decision making works (Birnbaum, 1988; Richardson, 1974). Yet, few theoretical models or frameworks take into account what governance should be in light of new and continually changing structural or contextual dynamics. The relationship between the following two widely held conclusions represents the focus of this article: (1) effective governance is important for institutional success; and (2) the organization, structure, and decision-making context at many institutions has changed significantly over the last two

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decades. One question raised by these two ideas is: How does the structural configuration of campus governing bodies influence the effectiveness of institutional decision making?

Undoubtedly the effectiveness of governance structures has significant consequences for institutional performance (Mortimer, 1971; Van Ginkel, 2001). However, the literature offers few insights on how structure (e.g., the configuration of governing bodies) influences campus decision making or institutional effectiveness. As the environment of higher education continues to change, governance structures have remained relatively static (Longin, 2002). A better understanding how organizational structure influences campus governance will be useful for researchers and campus leaders concerned with improving decision-making processes.

For colleges and universities, the 1980s and 1990s meant increased government involvement, drastic changes in information technology, and competition among institutions for limited resources. In turn, institutions were forced to govern themselves in a rapidly changing environment demanding faster-paced decision making (Schuster & Miller, 1989; Zusman, 1994). Many institutions now struggle with how to make decisions faster in the interest of being responsive while also maintaining the traditions of shared governance (Collis, 2001; Duderstadt, 2001). Issues such as intellectual property, distance education, the place of college athletics, and corporate partnerships force campuses to reconsider the role of the board, president, and faculty.

In this article, I utilize a case study to examine the relationship between institutional structure and the quality of academic governance. To begin, I define governance and provide a theoretical frame using an adaptation of rational decision-making theory. I then describe the case study and use data from interviews and documents to consider the effects of structure on institutional governance.

## The Function of Governance

The term shared governance generally implies the coming together of multiple university constituents to make decisions that affect an institution (Hamilton, 1999). The appropriation of authority among various constituents, however, is often a point of contention (Lazerson, 1997). One model of academic governance, collegiality, acknowledges the benefit of shared authority and participation as equals. This model emphasizes the process of continuous communication and deemphasizes status and power differences (Wolvin, 1991). However, the range and complexity of university decisions threaten traditional views and practices of shared governance.

University governance has been the subject of study for more than three decades, but the literature has not identified an authoritative theory of university governance (Allan, 1971; Corson, 1960). Richardson (1974), more than 30 years ago, noted, "There is nothing that can be properly regarded as an accepted theory of college governance" (p. 347). The diversity of colleges and universities and the structures within them make it nearly impossible to prescribe a "one size fits all" approach to governance. Many early studies of governance attempted to delineate the function of various governing bodies (i.e., governing boards, the president, and faculty) and the responsibilities of each with little attention given to context (American Association of University Professors, 1966; Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker, & Riley, 1977; Dykes, 1968; Gross & Grambasch, 1974; Mortimer & McConnell, 1978).

Governance research leaves many questions about the effectiveness of particular governance structures unanswered.

For the purpose of the present study, the term governance refers to the university structure that dictates decision-making authority: the organization of decision-making bodies. Decision making then refers to the processes employed by decision makers to reach a conclusion on issues under consideration. The literature points to various cultural models of university governance and to a lesser extent structure (Campbell, 2003; Del Favero, 2003; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). The case presented here is used to consider the question: How do structural configurations of governing bodies influence the effectiveness of campus decision making?

## Theoretical Framework: Bounded Rationality

There are widely accepted theoretical assumptions about how universities are organized (Birnbaum, 1988; Mortimer & McConnell, 1978; Weick, 1976). I draw upon what might be considered classic organization theory in higher education. Such theory treats institutions of higher education as distinct organizations. Even lay observers of higher education recognize that colleges and universities are organized and function significantly differently than business and industry entities. Universities are said to have ambiguous goals, nonroutine technology, and a professional culture that demands high levels of autonomy (Baldrige et al., 1977). These nuances increase the difficulty of making sense of organizational behavior in higher education, yet our need to understand requires the continued development of theoretical frames to interpret institutional behavior.

I utilize rational decision-making theory as a way of understanding university structures and their influence on outcomes. Many scholars call for the use of political, cultural, or anarchical theories in order to understand the organizational behavior of colleges and universities (Bess, 1988; Cohen & March, 1974; Floyd, 1985; Pusser & Ordorika, 2001; Tierney, 2004). Collectively these models are useful for interpreting a range of institutional activity and the interplay among structure, culture, politics, and outcomes (Del Favero, 2003; Eckel, 2000; Ferren, Kennan, & Lerch, 2001; Rhoades, 1995). My use of rational decision-making theory recognizes the social, cultural, and political dynamics of institutional behavior but also focuses on the organization as a whole versus specific interactions of individuals or subgroups.

A strict interpretation of rational decision-making theory maintains that decisions must involve clearly defined goals that must be known before decision making takes place. Concerning university decision making, there are a few limitations to this theoretical approach: (a) universities have multiple goals; (b) it is often difficult to know the consequences of a decision before making it; (c) many decisions are time bound, limiting the amount of information gathered about alternatives before making a choice; and (d) the consequences of decisions are often difficult to measure.

Consequently, I employ an adaptation of what Simon (1976) called bounded rationality. This theoretical model extends the fundamental assumptions of rationality. Bounded rationality maintains that an organization is a reified entity that can be understood and that members of the organization are able to interpret its parts in a similar manner. Bounded rationality from a decision-making perspective employs four slightly

different assumptions: (a) Goals are inferable; (b) alternatives cannot be completely known; (c) some, but not all, organizational behavior can be predicted; and (d) resources interact with decision processes (Nutt, 1976).

The use of bounded rationality allows for what Weick (1976) calls loose coupling, but it also assumes that the institution, as an entity, is structured to make rational decisions that can be understood by its members. Bounded rationality assumes that one might not be able to make sense of each organizational nuance, yet its goals, structure, and decision-making patterns are consistent.

To be clear, the aim here is not to account for or dismiss the importance of social exchanges between individuals but to examine the rationale of structures that often dictate how individuals interact. Bounded rationality is used to understand the extent to which decision-making bodies are organized to promote effectiveness (however defined) and the degree to which individuals within institutions make sense of the existing structures. Recent governance studies characterize governance structures as a challenge to institutional performance at multiple levels, because they are often inconsistent with institutional needs and individuals' understanding of the organization (Baldwin & Leslie, 2001; Dika & Janosik, 2003; Duderstadt, 2001; Jordan, 2001).

Based on this understanding of bounded rationality, two main theoretical assumptions help frame the present study. First, institutions with governance structures congruent with the practice of actual decision making are likely to experience more stable participation in campus governance and satisfaction among constituents with the process. In other words, given a particular type of decision one can predict the process that might ensue and the locale where decisions are likely made. Second, flexible governance structures able to respond to changes in the decision-making environment are more useful than static non-conforming structures. Governance structures should be rational in that decision-making bodies are intentionally arranged (or rearranged) to make determinations most effectively on issues under consideration.

## Methodology

This approach is not prognostic but, rather, seeks to make sense based on the analysis of data derived from the case (Denzin, 1988). The use of an interpretive approach allows participants to define and assess the effectiveness of their institution. Case study methods are intended to provide a description and/or analyses of a single instance or phenomenon, in this case, the governance structures and decision-making processes at a large university (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998). The case study method is particularly useful given the difficulty of making an outside judgment about the effectiveness of governance. This method also takes into account contextual conditions inextricably linked to decision making in universities (Yin, 2003).

### SELECTION OF SITE

This study is a follow-up to a national study on academic governance (Tierney & Minor, 2003). During the initial study, site visits to 15 campuses were conducted in conjunction with other research activities to better understand the challenges associated with academic governance. To better understand governance and decision making at institutions with more complex organizational configurations, a follow-up visit was conducted at two large

public research universities during the 2004–05 academic year. One of those institutions is the subject of this case study. Confidentiality agreements prevent disclosing the name of the institution or participants. The pseudonym complex university (CU) is used for the institution and only the positions of participants are disclosed. The particular institution was selected because of its structural characteristics and the potential for making inferences about similar institutions, or those becoming more organizationally complex.

### SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

I conducted one-hour interviews with 21 members of the campus. Interviewees included the provost, members of the university senate (including the chair), members of CU's faculty council, and a group of deans and faculty members from various disciplines. The participants were identified with the help of an "insider" and selected according to specific criteria provided as a means to enhance trustworthiness of the data. The criterion for selecting participants was purposed to gather diverse views concerning the quality of governance. Participants represented various vantage points within the institution. For example, some were without tenure, others were in administration, a number of them were longtime affiliates of the campus, and still others were newcomers.

In addition to the interviews, I collected governance-related documents such as minutes from the university senate meetings, the faculty handbook, the university constitution, and bylaws that direct governing bodies. Field notes, interview transcripts, governance-related documents, and observations of meetings provide the data for this case. The data were analyzed using a grounded-theory method, an inductive strategy used to develop themes based on a continual comparison of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Themes were developed according to the relationship between structural aspects of university governance and participant perceptions about how such structures influence the effectiveness of decision making. Grounded theory is a continual approach that uses data to support or reject developing theories about a particular phenomenon. Consequently, I view theoretical understanding about university governance as developmental more than established. In the following sections, I describe the campus, organizational characteristics, and themes that developed from the analysis.

## Findings

### CU: A DESCRIPTION

CU is a "flagship" public institution founded in the mid-1700s. It now boasts more than 25 undergraduate colleges and graduate and professional schools with a student body of more than 48,000. The racial/ethnic composition of the student population is approximately 60 percent White, 14 percent Asian, 11 percent African American, 9 percent Latino, and 7 percent foreign or unknown. More than 90 percent of students are in-state residents, with just more than half living on campus.

CU is recognized as a research-extensive university with more than 100 research institutes and many distinguished faculty members. The university has three campuses throughout the state: the main campus is located in "College Town," an urban campus in "City," and a rural campus in "Country." The president is located at the main campus, and the two other campuses are run by vice presidents for academic affairs with complete administrative staffs.

Although CU is one university, each campus has distinct academic programs, admission policies, and faculty. For example, the main campus and the rural campus each have law schools but do not share faculty, students, or standards for admission. The urban campus is distinguished by a more ethnically diverse student body and a significant proportion of students who attend class at night. The urban campus also contracts with a local private technology institute to exchange courses in liberal arts for higher-level math and science courses offered by the institute.

The main campus comprises five colleges, each located in geographically different places within College Town. Although undergraduates take courses across colleges, each college on the main campus has a distinct mission as well as admission standards. The colleges are physically held together by a bus system. Each college also has separate social activities and a reputation for hosting "particular types of students." Cambridge College, for example, has a reputation for admitting higher-achieving students whereas Liverpool is said to be where students who "require special academic attention" reside.

CU is governed by a matrix of bodies. To begin, the university has a board of governors composed of 11 voting members. The president of CU is an ex-officio member.

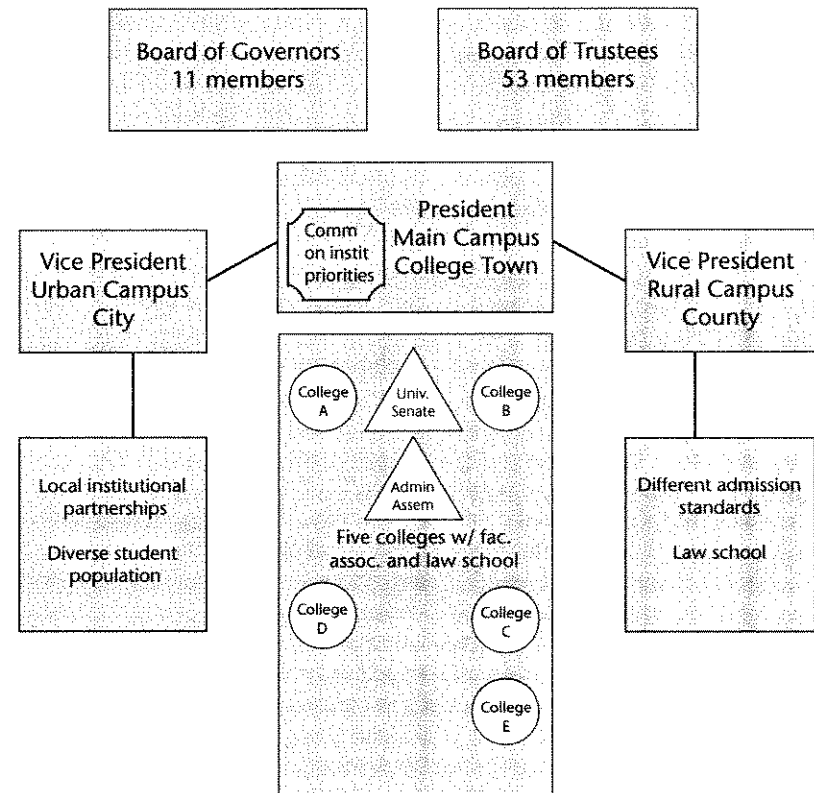


Figure 1. COMPLEX UNIVERSITY

Additionally, two faculty members and one student are elected as nonvoting representatives. Of the 11 voting members, the governor appoints 6 who are confirmed by the state Senate; five are elected by the board of trustees.

At the campus level there is both a university Senate and an administrative assembly. The administrative assembly is an elected deliberative body representing the university's nonunion, nonfaculty, administrative, professional, and supervisory employees. It consists of delegates elected annually. CU's president appoints a nonvoting delegate. The university Senate is a representative universitywide deliberative body consisting of faculty, students, administrators, and alumni. The Senate meets six times during the academic year to consider matters of general university interest and to make recommendations to the administration. In addition to the university Senate, each of the three campuses employs a faculty council, the principal faculty body that deals specifically with academic matters pertaining to faculty on a particular campus. fig. 1 provides a sketch of the university.

The following sections represent emergent themes that provide understanding about the governance structures and their perceived effectiveness.

### THEME 1: ENIGMATIC STRUCTURES

I found in speaking with campus constituents that many did not fully understand how the campus was organized or where many decisions were made. For example, while explaining the organizational structure, one faculty member and affiliate of the faculty council stated that "this is a really difficult university to understand. I've been here for 12 years and I still don't fully understand how things [units] fit together." In addition, as a former chair of the Senate deliberated on how campus decision-making bodies are organized, this individual paused and remarked, "I've never considered how what I'm explaining doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

The colleges on the main campus of CU are governed by faculty and faculty associates from different colleges. "Associates are faculty from other colleges that sit on schoolwide governing bodies that determine admission and graduation requirements. Faculty from one college can be associates in another. I know it's very bizarre," said one professor of eight years. Many campus constituents perceived the organizational and decision-making structure to be "unusual," "unnecessarily elaborate," and "complex." A longtime member of the campus and biology professor explained, "It's a very uneasy system with a lot of historical aspects still in place."

In addition to the elaborate and confusing structure, informal governing bodies also exist, that is, decision-making bodies that are not a part of the formal governance structures. "To further complicate things, there are also a few decision-making bodies set up by the president," explained the faculty leader of the campus American Association of University Professors chapter. The chair of the faculty council on the main campus reported not knowing the names of faculty who occupy these committees. The provost, however, claimed that "these committees are quite representative and communicate with a wide range of faculty."

A review of documents for each formal governing body revealed several inconsistencies and underlying ambiguities. For example, the bylaws for the faculty council (made up of 11 committees) states, "The faculty council will be the principal faculty

body from which the administration will seek advice and to which the administration will be accountable on campus-wide academic policy issues." The university manual states that the Senate (made up of 17 committees) "shall regulate formal relationships among the academic units within the university." Faculty associates do not fall under either of these bodies but have substantial influence in determining the academic matters in particular schools. Additionally, there are no clear indications of how academic matters concerning all three campuses are to be decided. From an organizational perspective, the governing bodies and academic units at CU are characterized as loose but not necessarily coupled.

### THEME 2: THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORICAL ASPECTS ON STRUCTURE

Understanding contextual aspects of an institution helps to better situate it and comprehend its organizational activity. Institutional history is, in part, responsible for the organization of CU. A dean, former provost, and campus historian by his own account provided some context that helps one understand the main campus:

*The president in the late fifties tried to make [CU] the Cambridge or Oxford of America. He had a plan of setting up 15 undergraduate colleges but that only went so far—the College of Arts and Sciences and Liverpool. In the sixties the university acquired three small private colleges which became CU's in name and association. Each had its own faculty and course offerings, which meant we had five different chemistry classes and five different sociology classes with faculty who didn't talk to each other. It remained that way until the early eighties. When I became provost we began to merge these faculty into departments but as you can see evidence of the old system is still present.*

The former Senate president explained the collection of governing boards. "The governor is pretty hands on. Neither the trustees nor the faculty will have much to do with decisions that come from the state." When asked why, she noted:

*Complex University is still a private institution that is under contract with the state. That's why we have both a board of trustees, the original governing body, and a board of governors that was put into place once we, in essence, became public. Today it's very clear that the board of governors wields the power, not the board of trustees.*

Participants in the study referred to a state government proposal to drastically reorganize the campus as an issue illustrative of CU's governance system. The introduction of the proposal from the governor took most at CU by surprise. When asked how the plan was developed, a dean asserted that "the plan to reorganize the university was basically announced to the campus." Essentially the plan was to reorganize all state institutions into a system similar to the way higher education is organized in California. A member of the Senate's executive committee claimed that "not a single member of the [CU] faculty was involved in the planning process." A former dean attested, "The campus after learning of the proposal was given the luxury of responding to the plan." The provost, who chose to

focus on shaping the plan through shared governance rather than dwell on how the proposal was developed, stated: "I've sent out a memo to all deans and directors asking them to solicit input and reactions from their faculty about the governor's proposal. Once I've gotten feedback we will craft an institutional response to the proposal and maybe some recommendations for change."

Still, many faculty members expressed low expectations, doubting that their input will make much difference. In response to questions about the faculty's role in modifying or approving the plan, the former Senate president stated: "I doubt if the faculty will have any role in deciding if we reorganize. We might have some say about how it's done." The governance climate at CU is one marked by faculty apathy, complexity, and illegitimacy. Although more than half of the participants agreed that the university needs to be reorganized, all except two disapproved of the governor's proposal and the method by which it was introduced.

### THEME 3: INCONGRUENCE OF AUTHORITY

Equally important to understanding the configuration of governing bodies is the extent of their authority. In the case of CU, statutory authority and "real" power are not necessarily congruent. "The Senate has a lot of power on paper," claimed one member of the faculty council. This individual also asserted that "the only thing [the Senate] actually does is decide on the academic calendar." According to a department chair, "The Senate is more of an information-sharing body that brings the multiple constituencies across the campus together to report more than dialogue."

Other decision-making bodies across the campus also have authority that is more spurious than real. For example, the president often ignores recommendations made by the faculty council. A dean suggested that "the faculty council was created because the faculty voice was being diluted in the Senate. Theoretically, it made sense but I can't point to anything significant the council has done." A member of the faculty council lamented, "The council is good for bringing up issues that affect faculty but there are so many other decision-making bodies that the council often has to compete for an ear to listen." Decision making on academic matters such as curriculum or graduation requirements are localized to schools and colleges. At CU an asymmetrical relationship exists among the structure of the campus, the organization of decision-making bodies, and authority.

In addition to the collection of decision-making bodies, CU has, for the last 12 years, employed a president "uninterested in faculty governance," according to more than half of the participants. The bylaws for the main campus state that the faculty council is the primary decision-making and advisory group on campus. According to one professor of 32 years, "The president listens to a special committee of which he selects the members—that's his version of faculty governance." There is a committee on institutional priorities appointed by the president that reports only to the president on special projects assigned to the committee members. "No one knows who's on this committee and they sure as hell don't consult with anyone outside of themselves," exclaimed one professor and faculty associate. The provost signaled that the president has, by his actions, alienated many faculty. He stated, "I see my role with the faculty as critical.

I serve as a buffer between them and the president. In years past there were incidents where the president chose to ignore the advice of faculty to pursue initiatives he thought would benefit the campus."

The organization of governing bodies at CU does not necessarily serve as an indication of where decision-making authority resides. In addition to the previously mentioned governing bodies, a collective bargaining unit for faculty is also in operation. Although the union deals "primarily with salary standards and grievances," it adds yet another piece to CU's governance puzzle and thins evermore the authority of other governing bodies. Faculty members view the president and board of governors as powerful. The provost sees each constituency, especially the faculty, as empowered, and only individuals who participate in the Senate and faculty council view those bodies as significant.

### Discussion

Given the characteristics of the present case, there are many directions one could take in discussing the relationship to governance. The focus here, however, is the extent to which governance structures influence effective university decision making. Bounded rationality as a frame is used to address how university structures relate to the expectations and understanding of those within an organization relative to the function of governance. A review of the interviews indicated that perceptions of effectiveness for 14 of the participants had much to do with making sense of the organization and the processes one might expect to be carried out during decision making. As one participant remarked, "Why waste time meeting? ... I understand why most people are skeptical about the values placed on shared governance." The context in which these comments were offered suggests that decision making at CU is more inscrutable than rational. In other words, if a decision-making body has no authority, then why bother having its members meet?

To be clear, I do not use the term rational to suggest that all decision-making processes within universities are such. In fact, I acknowledge contextual and interpersonal dynamics within university settings that significantly challenge rational-choice models of decision making. Bounded rationality is offered to suggest boundaries or a rational frame that offers legitimacy and reliability to university governance. The use of bounded rationality does not go so far as to suggest that every university decision should be predictable or carried out the same way in each instance. At the same time, capricious structures seem to negatively affect perceptions of effectiveness related to shared governance as well as participation among campus constituents. The findings revealed three considerable challenges for academic governance: (1) enigmatic governance structures, (2) inhibitive historical features of the organization, and (3) incongruence between the articulated decision-making patterns and actual execution. I next discuss the implications of each and how the challenges might be reconsidered.

### RECONCILING GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Kezar and Eckel (2004) conclude through a synthesis of the literature that the majority of studies conducted on governance focus perhaps too heavily on structure. Like other scholars, they suggest that cultural or social perspectives are useful for understanding governance (Del Favero, 2003; Tierney, 2004). Although I agree that cultural approaches are useful, they alone do not complete the picture of academic governance. Concerning the effect on

the quality of academic governance, structural and cultural aspects are not so easily distinguished. In other words, it may be more useful to consider structural and cultural aspects of university governance in relation to one another rather than in contrast.

From the present case it is apparent that cultural issues such as trust, communication, or perceptions about institutional values placed on shared governance are affected by structural characteristics. For example, trust between constituents was not necessarily mentioned as a problem. Participants did not view others from various governing bodies as distrustful. Most believed that members of the community were all working hard to improve the institution. It was trustworthiness of the system that represented the problem. That is, many participants did not believe that the system of governance, the collection of governing bodies, was legitimate. Structural inadequacies of the system and mere confusion significantly contributed to feelings of apathy, disempowerment, and modest participation among faculty—all cultural components of governance. When asked about changes that they would make to improve campus governance, 17 of 21 interviewees alluded to reforms that would logically streamline governing bodies and grant them legitimate authority. Individual trust and trustworthiness of the system are cultural elements of sound governance affected by structure.

Having attended meetings, the Senate at CU seemed to serve as a source of information (one directional), not necessarily communication (bidirectional). At each meeting, the vice president from one of the campuses reports about the activities of that particular campus. Other members of the Senate are not there to debate, contest, question, or rebut as much as simply to listen. The organization of governing bodies at CU significantly limits the facilitation of healthy debate on issues that affect the campus. A longtime professor and member of the Senate explained, "You can get information around here if you are diligent in your search, but once you have found out about something it usually means that communication about it has already taken place." Another longtime faculty member who disapproves of the way the campus is managed had this to say: "Like this plan to reorganize, communication usually means being made aware of something that's already been decided. I don't think that it's a matter of people being secretive but more an issue with how we're organized to communicate with one another." The poor practice of information sharing and the lack of communication are, in part, a result of the organization of formal and informal governing bodies.

The link between the structure and culture is evident at CU. Structural reforms and the empowerment of faculty governing bodies will likely improve cultural aspects such as apathy, trust, and communication. Challenges are intensified by the apparent mismatch between the structure and culture of decision making. CU's structure is built on separate units that never fully integrated. As a result, their interdependence is artificial, resulting in the ineffective integration of governing bodies.

#### TRADITIONAL VERSUS REFORMED GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

One intention of this article is to consider the actions universities can take to improve the function of decision making. At the core of this examination is the issue of evaluating the effectiveness of traditional structures that exist versus reformed structures that do not. By traditional structures I mean systems of governance that are the same as or closely resemble

the original configuration of governing bodies. Traditional structures could also be systems of governance that have been slightly adjusted but are essentially built on the original structure. By reformed structures I mean systems of governance redesigned or transformed based on an assessment of current needs and decision-making context. Reforming systems are pliable and regularly undergo reconsideration based on the relationship between governance activity and institutional effectiveness. Complete abandonment of traditional governance structures seems radical, and research on reformed or alternative structures does not exist. The lack of research on reform models, combined with relatively stable institutions of higher education, potentially make reforms less attractive.

Research that examines institutions with reformed or alternative systems of governance is only now being conducted. The for-profit sector is one target of such research (Morey, 2001; Sperling, 1998). The point here is not to pit the two (traditional and reformed structures) against one another. Instead, considering the benefits and drawbacks of traditional versus reformed structures would likely position institutions to make determinations about the effectiveness of their governance systems and how they might be improved. In the case of CU, it is clear that reforms are needed. Perhaps more important, the fact that no institutional efforts are directed toward assessing the effectiveness of its governance system jeopardizes institutional quality. The structure at CU has, over time, evolved rather than reformed. "Instead of creating a new system, [campus leaders] decided to just tack on [governing body] after [governing body] in an attempt to appease every constituent," explained one dean. This is promoted by the fact that in most universities it is much easier to add components to an existing structure than eliminate units, even if they are ineffective or irrational.

Most participants identified the structure as problematic and in need of reform. Many universities over the last three decades have changed significantly in response to changing student demographics and expectations, external pressures, and competition (Zusman, 1994). Yet, the structures by which they are governed have not kept pace with such changes (Amacher & Meiners, 2003). Institutions that engage in assessment of their governance system are likely better organized to make decisions in response to their needs and environment. In the absence of research and institutional assessment, the debate about traditional versus reformed systems of governance is immaterial.

#### LOOSELY COUPLED OR SPURIOUS?

Inefficiency is one feature of loosely coupled systems. Weick (1976) notes a relative lack of coordination, multiple activities to achieve one end, and infrequent inspection of activities as just a few problematic aspects of these systems. One assumption of organizational theory in higher education is that although decision making in the university is diffuse, governing bodies have legitimate authority. In other words, the curriculum committee decides on curriculum; the outlined responsibility or authority of a particular body is actually where related items are decided upon. In such cases, university decision making is still loosely coupled but not spurious. The term spurious in a research context implies that the effect of a particular variable is thought to be correlated to another when in fact it is not. I use the term spurious in a governance context to mean decision-making bodies that appear to have authority but do not. Illegitimate governing bodies create spurious governance systems in which participants are never certain where authority lies.

Both the organization and authority of governing bodies at CU create challenges that threaten the legitimacy and effectiveness of their governance system. The provost has made attempts to gather input about the reorganization plan, but many faculty members feel as though their opinions will have little influence on the final decisions. "If the governor wants this to happen then it will. The president and vice presidents will have some say in how it's done and the faculty will be left to implement drastic changes," said a department chair. Another faculty member claimed, "Few of the faculty governing bodies have real authority." One faculty council member lamented, "You never really know who's doing what or whether input of a particular group will even matter in the final decision." Although the organizational complexities represent an obvious challenge for effective governance, dissatisfaction appears to be compounded by spurious governing bodies. Not only is the structure of governing bodies exceedingly complex; it is also illegitimate.

Loose coupling in universities also suggests that the activity in individual units is separate but, at the same time, responsive to the direction of the institution. At CU individual units are "loosely aligned," rather than loosely coupled. Institutional activity and decision making at CU is, in many cases, "fragmented," "completely separate," and void of association with other units. Two glaring examples of this are the process by which undergraduate students are admitted and the presence of two law schools. Admission standards and the mission for various colleges are significantly different. According to one professor, "Much of the reason no one knows what's going on is because our activities are so disjointed that there is very little to keep various departments or colleges linked to one another." This claim does not suggest that every unit at CU is disconnected from another. Rather, too much university activity and decision making takes place without clear paths of authority, accountability, or communication, creating a loosely aligned and spurious system.

### Implications for Faculty and Future Research

Recently, researchers have paid more attention to the quality of faculty work conditions as a determinant of institutional quality (Austin, 2003; Burgan, 1998; Finkelstein, Seal, & Schuster, 1998). Effective university governance and faculty participation are said to be in conflict (Scott, 1996; Trow, 1990). On the one hand, faculty participation in university governance is vital for communication with administrators and the protection of academic quality and is associated with job satisfaction among faculty (Evans, 1999; Floyd, 1994; Miller, 1999). On the other hand, the nature of faculty work, increased expectations placed on pretenure faculty, and the expansion of administrative duties in the university represent challenges for effective faculty participation in governance (Austin, 2003; Benjamin & Carroll, 1999). These difficulties are related to the structural challenges that many universities confront, which heightens the need to consider how universities might be better organized to support and involve faculty in decision making.

This does not suggest that at CU faculty involvement in decision making is dead. Faculty members tend to be more involved in department- and college-level decisions. Decisions at the university level represent a primary challenge. Issues such as institutional planning, budget priorities, university policy, and selection of the president and senior administrators are universitywide decisions for which the involvement of faculty is more contentious (Duderstadt, 2004). From the present case there was also an indication that improving the quality of academic governance is also dependent on the willingness of faculty to be more

involved in university-level decision making, as a means to improve overall university quality and the culture of participation (Evans, 1999; Longin, 2002). This notion of faculty responsibility for the improvement of university governance is one deserving of more attention.

A fundamental challenge is advancing reform efforts that honor the traditions of the academy yet attend to contemporary aspects of universities. The scope of the present study is limited to one large public research university. Although there are some inferences that might be made for other large public universities, this study does not address issues more prevalent at smaller institutions such as liberal arts colleges. Research that attempts to delineate differences among various institutional types would provide needed nuance to governance research. This study also views the issue of academic governance from a structural/rational perspective. Although structural and cultural models of governance represent the most common perspectives used for research, alternative perspectives would expand understanding of this issue. For example, perspectives that view governance from an accountability standpoint would add an important dimension for understanding university governance. Additionally, studies able to demonstrate the relationship between governance models and university performance would also be useful.

### Conclusion

At a time when the environment surrounding higher education is continually changing, transforming the structure by which decisions are made is worth consideration. Many in higher education have given up on change, resorting to beliefs that it is beyond them or will not happen during their career. As one faculty member expressed, "I doubt that much will change with respect to how we're governed." The traditions of academic governance are so ingrained that a complete overhaul is unlikely. An assessment of governance structures in relation to decision-making cultures and institutional effectiveness represents a more plausible start to improvement. At colleges and universities where innovation is a cornerstone, the lack of change to governance structures is peculiar. The word *reform* does not mean that traditions of the university will be lost. It is difficult to imagine a time when curriculum is not the domain of the faculty. I interpret the term to mean adjustments made in response to changing contextual circumstances in the interest of improving institutional performance. The alternative is employing ineffective governance structures for the sake of tradition.

Birnbaum (1988) noted that the organization of higher-education institutions is inefficient yet effective in serving the ambiguous goals. Still, there is the assumption that governance activity is organized rationally to maintain the system. Is there a threat of becoming too loosely coupled? In the case of CU the answer is yes. As universities continue to fulfill extensive missions, what are the implications for governance? Clearly, as universities undertake more activity, organizational structures will expand. However, expansion without consideration of the effects on governance and decision making will significantly compromise the ability to effectively manage a university and change. In fact, I offer this point retrospectively. That is to say, a large number of institutions today employ governance structures inconsistent with their current activity.

The CU case may also provide an indication of one consequence for institutions unable to remedy inadequate governance structures. The governor's proposal for restructuring was in response to CU's organizational dilemma. Issues of inefficiency were of great concern.

A few participants, although in disagreement with the process, were of the opinion that “this is the only way CU will effectively reorganize itself. We would never get it done on our own, which is why I [we] think the governor forced his hand.” Although every consequence of ineffective governance structures is unknown, the continued success of academic institutions is dependent on the ability of campus leaders to position and reposition their institutions for effective decision making. “Yes, the time has come to identify and develop new governance structures and processes—ones consistent with institutional mission, culture, and traditions, but not rigidly limited by past assumptions and antiquated practice” (Longin, 2002 p. 219).

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