

FOUR CHALLENGES FACING FACULTY SENATES

by James T. Minor

In this age of institutional change and competition, effective governance and decision-making is more important than ever for higher education.¹ Yet, for more than three decades institutions of higher education have struggled with how to best make decisions and appropriately grant authority.²

Traditionally, it is during times of change or crisis when contention is most apparent. Institutions facing changes such as program discontinuance, turnover in leadership, or the implementation of new initiatives often struggles with who should decide. Accreditation challenges, budget shortfalls, or scandal are just a few other issues that create tense decision-making environments. Distance education, for example, has significant consequences for multiple university constituents. Additionally, competition from the for-profit sector now compels many institutions to adjust admission policies, curriculum, and student services in accordance with market forces.

The role of faculty in campus decision-making is of particular interest because many consider it the core of academic governance.³ Compared to other campus governing bodies—governing boards and administra-

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tors—the role faculty play in campus decision-making is the subject of more concentrated attention and criticism from scholars, but as we shall see, not much research.

The idea of faculty being marginalized is of particular concern for faculty leaders.⁴ At the same time, campus administrators are under pressure to make fast-paced decisions in response to a constantly changing climate. How are faculty most effectively involved in decision-making given the current higher education environment?

In a recent survey, over 50 percent of faculty expressed dissatisfaction with their involvement in decision-making.

One constant quandary for those in search of ways to improve governance is insufficient knowledge about where exactly the challenges lie. Although governance seems ubiquitous, many erroneously believe it is well understood. Research on governance and faculty involvement is scant.⁵ Much of the work relies on experience-based anecdotes and work using small case studies.⁶ In essence, the higher education community is left to speculate about what factors criti-

cally impact the role faculty senates play in governance.

In a recent survey, over 50 percent of faculty expressed dissatisfaction with their involvement in decision-making.⁷ This combined with the frequency of campus fallouts is sufficient reason to seek improvements. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to be clear about what challenges exist. This article uses two research projects, a national survey, and interviews with faculty senate presidents to identify four challenges for faculty senates. I first describe the studies from which the data are derived. I then describe the challenges and discuss ways to potentially improve the performance of senates.

To better understand aspects of faculty governance, a three-year research project was initiated. The first phase involved a national survey of 763 four-year colleges and universities. Based on the Carnegie Classification of Higher Education Institutions, the random sample included 150 doctoral universities, 302 master's institutions, and 311 baccalaureate colleges. The sampled institutions represent approximately 55 percent of all schools in each sector. For example, of the 611 existing master's colleges, 302 (49%) were sampled. Among the doctoral universities, 79 were public and 71 were private. Among the master's institutions, 140 were public and 162 were private. And among baccalaureate colleges, 68 institutions were public and 243 were private. These ratios also closely

resemble the ratio of public to private institutions in the total population of each institutional sector.

For each institution the vice president for academic affairs or provost, the faculty senate president or equivalent, and three department chairs were targeted. Overall, more than 3,760 individuals were solicited. Among the 150 doctoral universities targeted, 119 (79%) responded. Among the 302 master’s institutions targeted, 236 (78%) responded. And among the 311 baccalaureate colleges, 233 (77%) responded. Table 1 reports institutional and constituency response rates.

Table 1: Response rate for institutions and constituency groups

Institutions

	Targeted	Response Rate
Doctoral	150	119 (79%)
Masters	302	236 (78%)
Baccalaureate	311	233 (75%)
Total	N= 763	N= 588 (77%)

Constituency Groups

	Targeted	Response Rate
Academic Vice President	757	416 (55%)
Faculty Senate Chair	749	509 (68%)
Faculty	2256	1128 (50%)
Total	N= 3,762	N= 2,053 (55%)

The second phase of the research project involved telephone interviews with faculty senate presidents. To search out more details about the challenges of faculty governance and to flesh out the survey data, I contacted 50 senate presidents at doctoral institutions (not included in survey) to arrange telephone interviews. Overall, 42 senate presidents participated in hourlong interviews. Thirty-one of the institutions were public and 11 were private. Each participant responded to 10 semi-structured questions. Both the survey and telephone interviews were intended to provide insight about the structural, cultural, and functional aspects of faculty senates.

For this study, I define faculty governance as the formal participation of faculty governing bodies in campus decision-making. In many cases this involves the faculty senate. However, on a number of campuses an

academic senate, faculty council, faculty assembly, or an alternative faculty governing body is employed. As a caveat, it is important to acknowledge that faculty occasionally participate in governance and decision-making outside the senate or formal governing body. For example, an ad hoc or special committee can serve as an alternative venue for faculty participation.⁸ Additionally, not every campus has a senate. Senates, however, remain the most common vehicle for formal faculty participation in governance and provide a common unit of analysis across campuses.

The analyses of the survey data include regression analysis, cross-tabulations, and ANOVA. The interviews were analyzed using axial coding techniques to develop themes related to the role senates play in campus governance.⁹

Based on these data and analyses, I found the following four challenges facing faculty senates and impacting their role in governance.

Challenge 1: Faculty senates are understudied.

At the outset of conducting the survey on faculty governance, I searched several educational databases from 1970 to 2001 for articles on academic or “shared” governance. Excluding the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Black Issues in Higher Education*, I found approximately 154 articles in refereed journals, special reports, and other higher education publications. Forty-two articles particularly address the involvement of faculty in governance. Just 13 specifically address faculty senates. Of those 13 articles, six are based on a literature review or lack empirical data. A mere seven are based on sample data, two of which are based on single-institution case studies. If the amount of scholarship available is indicative of how much is known about faculty senates, the need for more research is compelling. Attempts to make determinations about restructuring governance systems and senates without the benefit of sufficient research can lead to precarious action.



In the absence of comparative data, a national snapshot of how senates operate, or clues to what contributes to effective senates, campus leaders have relied on experience and intuition to manage institutions. Although discussion on faculty governance and senates appears regularly in publications, it is often viewpoint-based or in response to crisis.¹⁰ Consequently, the opinions offered reflect, in many cases, narrow or parochial views of institutional governance and of faculty senate involvement. How do senates in similar or different institutions deal with curriculum change? How does senate leadership affect its performance? What are attributes of senates that are effective in improving institutional quality? These are only a few questions that, if informed by research, could substantially help the development of policy and practice as it relates to faculty senates.

Also problematic is the lack of theoretical work concerning senates. While the number of publications on governance reflects the

importance of the subject to those in higher education, the lack of research has limited theoretical development and subsequent understanding about senates. Probably the most well known theoretical contribution is Birnbaum's¹¹ work that outlines the latent functions of faculty senates. In explaining, "why senates do not work but will not go away," he suggests that senates perform a number of important latent (or symbolic) functions. Because senates are traditionally viewed using bureaucratic criteria of organizational effectiveness, they are viewed as failing. However, Birnbaum argues that the latent functions senates perform, although viewed ineffective structurally, are important to the overall institutional function. For example, he claims that the senate can serve as a status provider for faculty members whose status based on traditional norms are hampered by a lack of scholarly achievement.

Research on faculty senates lags far behind the discussion and debate that takes place around the topic. The fact that over 90 percent of four-year colleges and universities have a faculty governing body makes the lack of research in this area ghastly.¹²

While searching databases, I found that the most recent articles on senates using sample data were published more than a decade ago.¹³ Enhanced understanding about how senates contribute to, or inhibit, effective campus governance will come through the extensive research. Over 70 percent of senate presidents from the telephone interviews

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report being unaware of senate operations on comparable campuses. Cross campus comparisons, benchmarks, and models of effective senates are key for enhancing understanding of faculty senates, even in places with unique institutional contexts.

Challenge 2: There are multiple concepts of shared governance.

Multiple interpretations held by campus constituents about what the term “shared governance” actually means remains a challenge for improving faculty governance.¹⁴

Eight-seven percent of respondents from the survey believe that shared governance is an important aspect of their institution’s value and identity.

Many campuses experience strained decision-making as a result of competing interpretations of the meaning and process.¹⁵ From a rational standpoint, high-stakes decision-making on campuses where multiple constituents hold disparate views about decision-making processes inevitably leads to contention. Usually faculty feel they should be more involved in campus decision-making. While administrators may agree, it is the nature of fac-

ulty involvement that creates controversy. Ambiguity within and across campus constituencies over how shared governance is employed creates challenges for faculty senates.

Eighty-seven percent of respondents from the survey believe that shared governance is an important aspect of their institution’s value and identity. However, over 50 percent of faculty are dissatisfied with the nature of their involvement in campus decision-making. Respondents were asked to use their own words to provide a brief definition of shared governance. A content analysis revealed three distinct categories by which respondents define shared governance: 1) fully collaborative, 2) stratified, and 3) consultative. I briefly define each and include quotes from the survey participants to further explicate the descriptions.

Fully collaborative. This view believes that all constituency groups should be meaningfully involved in the decision-making process. Many respondents defined shared governance as the structure and process by which all constituency groups (i.e., governing boards, the administration, faculty, and students) work together to make institutional decisions. This definition of shared governance grants decision-making power to each campus constituency regardless of decision type. Forty-eight percent of participants subscribe to this definition.

One respondent explained that “shared governance is constant consultation between all internal constituencies on all policies and procedure issues.” Another defined it as “a transparent, engaged process in which key constituencies and stakeholders (administration, faculty, staff, and students) work collaboratively towards problem definition and solutions.” In agreement, another described it as “faculty and administration functioning as partners in charting the strategic direction of the institution. Decisions are made collaboratively and, when possible, by consensus.”

Stratified decision-making.

According to this view, different constituency groups have authority over specific areas of the institution. This definition of shared governance assumes that the decision type dictates decision-making authority. In other words, governing the institution is shared because each constituency group has authority in a particular area. Decision-making in particular areas is not shared but stratified. Faculty, for

example, have authority over curriculum and faculty appointments, administrators have authority over the budget and university policy, and governing boards have ultimate legal authority. This definition draws clear lines of decision-making authority with minimal influence from other constituency groups except under unusual circumstances. For this group shared governance is the structure that grants decision-making authority to different constituency groups. Decision-making is then the process by which those given authority make determinations on issues under consideration. Twenty percent of respondents define this as shared governance.

“Virtually all decisions on curriculum, work conditions, and academic organization are made by the faculty themselves. Faculty contributions to academic decision-making are substantive and significant, and if faculty have a serious gripe, their opinions carry great weight,” wrote one respondent.

Another participant explained “not that faculty make all decisions regarding the institution... however, faculty are responsible for development of the academic programs and content. They might, or might not, be consulted on matters of the overall development of the institution.”

A third defined shared governance as “faculty having full responsibility for curriculum and the administration being responsible for the operation and policies of the campus. The two [faculty and administra-

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tion] should come together when necessary but the lines in the sand are clear.”

Consultative. For these respondents the administration has principal authority but consults with faculty and other constituents before making final decisions. This definition grants the majority of decision-making authority to the president and other top administrators with the

expectation that they take into consideration the input of campus stakeholders. Important to this definition of shared governance is effective communication about decisions, the sharing of important information, and maintaining the trust and confidence of constituencies. Thirty-two percent of respondents assert that this is “actually” shared governance.

One respondent commented that shared governance “is when the faculty senate is routinely asked for its advice on matters affecting the institution in a timely fashion permitting

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thoughtful response and when it is clear that this advice is valued and frequently followed.” Another defined shared governance as “an environment in which faculty concerns are always heard and maybe even sometimes heeded.” The person further explained that “the optimal word here is *shared*, which at least implies that the administration puts forth a good faith effort to seek advice and maybe even listen.” Another participant expounded the definition by asserting that shared governance is employed when “faculty recommendations and resolutions are seriously considered, and if rejected, a clear rationale is provided by the decision-makers.”

Imagine a campus where all three definitions are at work during major decision-making. Even on campuses faced with reconciling two competing definitions of shared governance, the path to effective decision-making is likely to be treacherous. The words of one respondent might more effectively capture the state of many campuses: “We have much work yet to do to define shared governance in a way that allows this rapidly growing institution to make the changes believed necessary by the board and administration and yet to provide appropriate involvement of faculty.”

Challenge 3: Faculty lack interest and involvement in the senate.

Among the respondents in the survey, just 19 percent of those in doctoral universities agree that faculty have a high level of interest in the

activities of the senate. This compared with 39 percent in master’s institutions, and 54 percent in baccalaureate colleges. The problem of marginal faculty participation in the senate has significant consequences for performance. Campuses where faculty have higher levels of participation and interest in the senate are campuses that have more effective senates.¹⁶ Overall, institutions report that just 41 percent of faculty have high levels of interest in senate activity (see Table 2).

Table 2a: Faculty have a high level of interest in the senate

Type	Strongly agree/ agree	Disagree/ strongly disagree
Baccalaureate	54%	39%
Masters	39%	57%
Doctoral	19%	75%

Table 2b: Faculty involvement in the senate is highly valued

Type	Strongly agree/ agree	Disagree/ strongly disagree
Baccalaureate	61%	33%
Masters	52%	43%
Doctoral	33%	62%

Doctoral institutions, where faculty interest and participation is lowest, also report lower levels of confidence in their senate’s ability to contribute to campus decision-making. The data also show that those institutions where numerous faculty are disinterested in the senate are also institutions where other governing bodies—administrators and governing boards—view the senate as being less powerful. As a result, one question is what can faculty in doctoral institutions learn from baccalaureate institutions where the highest levels of faculty involvement exist?

The answer likely has to do with institutional culture as well as structural constraints. To further illustrate the challenge, one faculty senate president in a telephone interview explained: “One of the biggest challenges to moving forward is that we can’t find good people [faculty] willing to assume leadership roles in the senate.” Another lamented: “There’s never been more than two candidates interested in being the president. I ran unopposed.”

One common explanation of such lack of interest is the notion that participation in the senate is a “waste of time” and participation requires sacrifices that yield little to no change.¹⁷ At the same time, some argue that in order to create noticeable change the most influential faculty must

be involved.¹⁸ Survey respondents were asked, in an open-ended question, about the most difficult challenge to faculty participation in governance at their institutions. Their responses reflect two general categories: structural challenges and cultural challenges.

Structural challenges include lack of time, scheduling, or faculty workload that inhibits participation in the senate. Many faculty report that finding time to meaningfully participate in governance is

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difficult because of their workload and other institutional and/or professional commitments. Senate presidents from the telephone interviews report spending an average of 16 hours per week on senate-related work. Structural challenges also refer to bureaucratic obstacles or untimely action that hamper decision-making. Respondents report that long meaningless processes, irrelevant meetings,

or "red tape" often serve as obstacles for participation.

One respondent from the survey claimed that a serious challenge to faculty participation in the senate is that the "board of trustees and the president are adopting a top-down, corporate, bureaucratic model of management and increasingly ignoring the role of faculty." Another claimed that: "the biggest challenge to faculty governance is the time and opportunity for faculty to participate given their teaching and advising loads, not to mention any disciplinary commitments one might have." A third commented: "There are time constraints. Meetings are once a month for 50 minutes and they just let motions pass because they know there isn't enough time for discussion. There is currently discussion about moving to a more representative structure because our senate has grown too large to conduct business effectively."

While considering structural challenges such as those mentioned by respondents, institutional support for the senate is often thought of as one remedy. However, the survey findings indicate that institutional supports, such as support, release time, or stipends (for the senate chair) are inversely correlated with faculty participation. For example, baccalaureate colleges that show the highest levels of faculty participation in the senate, receive the least amount of institutional support for senate operations.

Conversely, doctoral universities where faculty interest and involve-

ment in the senate is lowest, receive the most institutional support. I am not suggesting that institutional support is not needed or important. Rather this finding calls into question the effectiveness of institutional support as it relates to faculty participation. Could resources be better used to encourage faculty participation?

Cultural challenges can involve negative perceptions held by faculty or administrators about the trustworthiness or credibility of the decision-making processes. Cultural challenges also refer to the lack of confidence faculty have in campus governance. Many do not believe that they can actually make a difference. Cynicism based on past transgressions of an administration can infuse distrust, causing faculty to withdraw or feel apathetic. One faculty member exclaimed: "The president is a fascist!" While this may seem extreme, it illustrates the level of distrust some faculty have about the process of shared governance.

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One individual explained that one challenge to faculty involvement is "the willingness of administration to acknowledge that faculty have something important to contribute to the institution's improvement. Additionally, the hostility of administration toward faculty who desire to participate in decision-making is discouraging." Another described the problem as "convincing the faculty that they have the ability to effect change in the decisions that are made. Instead of consistently participating in problems as they are presented, the faculty wait for the administration to take action, then they register their dislike."

A former participant in the senate offered another perspective. "The main hurdle to a better faculty senate is an inept [senate] president with a hidden agenda. The faculty senate here is made up of malcontents and 1960s-type radicals who spend too much time trying to circumvent policy due to personal beefs with the president." The cultural challenges to faculty participation in part stem from various concepts of what shared governance means.

Cultural challenges also reflect deep-rooted negative perceptions about campus governance that can negate structural changes to improve senate performance. As a result, acknowledgment of both structural and cultural challenges is important for addressing the issue of modest faculty participation in the senate.

Challenge 4: Incongruence between the idea and function of governance

Although nearly half of campus constituents define shared governance as a collaborative decision-making process, the data show faculty have decision-making authority mainly over academic issues and minimal involvement in matters traditionally considered administrative. While some constituents hold collaborative views of shared governance, many campuses actually employ stratified governance structures. That is, in

many cases the idea of shared governance held by campus members does not reflect the actual process of decision-making. Survey findings show that 57 percent of university constituents who believe shared governance is an important part of the institution do not believe that the faculty senate is an important governing body. As another indication of incongruence, a concern over budget shortfalls was the most consistently mentioned challenge facing the sampled institutions, yet only 16

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percent believe that faculty have substantial influence in determining budget priorities.

Table 3 shows perceptions of faculty influence among only those respondents who believe that shared governance is an important aspect of their institution.

Table 3: Responses of those who believe that shared governance is important on the influence of faculty

Respondents who believe that shared governance is important	Strongly agree/ agree	Strongly disagree/ disagree
The faculty senate is an important governing body	38%	57%
Faculty have substantial influence in setting strategic priorities	38%	28%
Faculty have substantial influence in setting budget priorities	16%	55%

One consistent theme among senate presidents interviewed by telephone was that the senate should assume more responsibility than is tra-

ditionally prescribed for faculty. Involvement in issues related to budget, athletics, and having more formal authority over academic matters were among the goals most frequently mentioned. Many senate presidents viewed the senate as able to do more if governance was “in fact shared.”

One senate president lamented: “It would be nice if the administration would put some meat on our plate. We often hear about the importance of faculty governance, but the practice of listening to advice after the decision has already been made sends a very different message.”

Fundamentally, the incongruence between the idea and actual function of governance is a conflict between collegial and bureaucratic theory. A collegial model of organizational theory emphasizes thoroughness and deliberation. Collegial models of organization value the participation of all members, the sharing of power, and a community of equals. The bureaucratic model of organization is based on hierarchy and efficient operation leaving little room for full deliberation.

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Bureaucratic or managerial organizations are more likely to focus on outcomes rather than on process and to value the division of responsibility and authority.¹⁹

Keep in mind that the challenge of aligning ideas about governance with the process is more complex than two competing theories of organizational behavior. Instead the challenge involves taking into account institutional changes as well as situational and cultural contexts. It is also important to note that the process of decision-making often changes as frequently as the decisions themselves. As a result, campus governance can become a nebulous concept and the terms of decision-making are often negotiated, renegotiated, or implied. In an effort to explain the confusion between the idea and actual process of governance, some scholars posit that current decision-making environments are significantly more complex today than to three decades ago, blurring the lines of responsibility and authority.²⁰ Few institutional decisions are purely academic or administrative.

Many university decisions now hold consequences for multiple constituents. An issue such as technological change can have budgetary, instructional, and curriculum implications. Distance education, development, information technology, and admission standards are only a few other examples. As a result, many campus leaders find it difficult to rec-

oncile the traditions of shared governance with today's decision-making environment.²¹ Still, one faculty senate president interviewed by telephone maintained, "there isn't a decision this college makes, no matter how administrative, that doesn't in some way affect teaching and learning on this campus."

Unfortunately, the only point of agreement about senates is that they are challenged. Among each major governing constituent—governing boards, presidents, and faculty—faculty are most often accused of negatively impacting governance. Although governing boards and presidents play important roles, the contributions of faculty can be equally impactful and sustaining. The need to maintain fidelity to the intellectual enterprise is vitally important for institutions to achieve their mission. Consequently, it is important for faculty to maintain a place in decision-making in a way that allows campuses to move forward at a responsible pace. Outlining the four challenges presented in this article, I hope, provides an opportunity to reconsider the importance of faculty governance and the benefits that improvements might produce. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Collis, "New business models," 97-115; Duderstadt, *A university for the 21st century*; Longin, "Institutional governance," 211-221.
- 2 Allan, "Twixt terror and thermidor," 292-309; Clark, "Faculty organization and authority," 76-93; Corson, "The modernization of the university," 430-442; Ikenberry, "Restructuring college and university organization," 421-429; Mortimer, "The dilemmas in new campus governance structures," 467-483.
- 3 Birnbaum, *How colleges work*; Collie and Chronister, "In search of the next," 22-23.
- 4 Boyer, *Scholarship reconsidered*; Burgan, "Academic citizenship," 16-21; Gerber, "Inextricably linked," 22-24; Ramo, *Assessing the faculty's role*.
- 5 Kezar and Eckel, "Meeting today's governance challenges."
- 6 Lazerson, "Who owns higher education," 1-7; Pusser, "AGB-UVA symposium on research;" Trow, "Governance in the University of California," 202-215; Williams, Gore, Broches, and Lostoski, "One faculty's perception," 629-657.
- 7 Tierney and Minor, *Challenges for governance*.
- 8 Dill and Helm, "Faculty participation," 317-355; Schuster, Smith, Corak, and Yamada, *Strategic academic governance*.
- 9 Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.
- 10 Jordan, "The faculty senate minuet," 18-23; Scott, "The strange death," 28-33; Trow, "The academic senate," 23-27.
- 11 Birnbaum, "The cybernetic institution," 239-253.
- 12 Gilmour, "Your faculty senate," 16-19.
- 13 Ibid.; Lee, "Campus leaders," 41-61.
- 14 Hamilton, "Are we speaking the same language?" 24-31; Keller, "Governance: the remarkable ambiguity," 504-522.
- 15 Tierney, *Competing conceptions of academic governance*.
- 16 Minor, "Assessing the senate," 960-977.
- 17 Burgan, "Academic citizenship," 16-21; Scott, "Death by inattention," 28-33.

¹⁸Collie and Chronister, "In search of the next," 22-23.

¹⁹Birnbaum, *How colleges work*.

²⁰Benjamin and Carroll, "The implications of the changed environment," 92-119; Duderstadt, "Fire, ready, aim!" 26-51; Gumpert, "Academic governance: New light on old issues."

²¹Collis, "When industries change"; Kezar, "Seeking a sense of balance," 4-8; Mingle, "Higher education's future."

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