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Administrators Must Dispel the Derogatory Myths About Professors



Michael Morgenstern for The Chronicle

By Steven C. Bahls

As president of Augustana College, I live in two worlds: that of higher education, and that of the "outside world" beyond campus borders. For decades I have listened to alumni, parents, local residents, and even complete strangers express their opinions about academe—often while reciting certain derogatory myths regarding college professors. On occasion, I even hear my presidential colleagues doing the same. Popular complaints include:

- Managing professors is like herding cats.
- When it comes to making tough decisions, faculty members want merely to be *asked* to be included in the process, but have no desire to actually participate.
- There's really only one way to work with the faculty: Find the path of least resistance and proceed accordingly.
- Faculty members are professional contrarians, and the academy rewards them for it by giving them tenure.
- When you finally give in to the contrarians, they can't take "yes" for an answer.

Such myths are as dangerous as they are demeaning, as caustic as they are comical, and can be as incendiary as they are inaccurate. The worst of them may be the notion that faculty members are irrepressible contrarians: Not only is that view disparaging, but it ignores the time-tested benefits of shared faculty governance, an essential institution at today's colleges and universities that is badly misunderstood by the outside world. Especially in our current environment of limited resources and cutbacks, responsibility for governing an institution of higher education should be shared. Professors must be empowered to participate in and shape the outcomes of policies, procedures, and long-term decisions, for a very pragmatic reason: Faculty members often are the ones who have to carry them out.

While it's true that the potential exists for faculty-governance decision making to become ponderous and inefficient, that is true of any process. And in today's world, we need less seat-of-the-pants decision making and more careful and participatory deliberation. Myths about faculty members, if believed by presidents and deans, can chill our willingness to ask professors to help with governance. Yes, it may be easier to govern without them, but the college will suffer for it.

When institutions fail, it is often because they have strayed from their values. Think of the financial institutions that have failed recently because they strayed from their traditional role of sound stewardship to one of reckless speculation. What if AIG had had a few more contrarians in the governance process? Although academe may indeed have a few people who have a hard time taking "yes" for answer, that is far better than too many.

It is our tenured faculty members, most of whom have made life-long commitments to our institutions, who are the first to remind us of those institutions' values. It is those values that sustain our commitment to quality in good times and bad. Because shared governance in the academy has historically led to thoughtful decisions consistent with long-held institutional values, our colleges and universities are among the oldest institutions in the nation. We must continue to affirm the decision making of those who execute our decisions—our faculties—and dismiss the outside world's notion that participatory governance is nothing more than herding cats.

The people who become board members for private institutions and regents for public institutions—notable alumni, successful businesspeople, religious leaders, heads of nonprofit organizations, members of the local community—usually come from the world outside academe. Often they are surprised to learn how colleges are governed and are inclined to believe the negative things they've heard about faculty members.

As a college president and former faculty member, it is my role to facilitate understanding of the crucial role that professors play on a campus. Because of the corrosive and pervasive nature of those myths, I have begun working with new trustees to help clarify the helpful and important role that faculty governance can play.

Last spring the academic dean and I discussed with our board the necessary role of faculty governance on the campus. That discussion was precipitated by a blog developed by an academic department to discuss (and sometimes vent about) my decision not to recommend a candidate for tenure in a case where I received a closely divided, but positive, recommendation from the faculty. A number of faculty members who posted on the blog believed the president and board should have no real role in tenure decisions, other than to rubber-stamp the faculty recommendation. And a few board members were dismayed at the tone of the faculty reaction to my decision.

The board then expressed a desire to work with the faculty and administration to review our approach to governance. We developed a task force on shared governance to achieve better communication, improve cooperation, and foster mutual respect among the faculty, the administration, and the board. The task force's membership included five board members, six faculty members, our academic dean, and me.

The process brought significant reflection on the need for and benefit of shared governance on our campus. Honest discussions were held within the task force and the board as a whole, touching on such topics as faculty participation in campus decision making, the administration's involvement in tenure decisions, and the faculty's role in the attainment of the college's aggressive strategic plan.

And the economic downturn has made our focus on faculty governance all the more important, as the traditional domains of their responsibility include faculty salary policies, involvement in academic budgeting, and strategic planning. For that reason faculty members have a place at the table when difficult topics arise. We aren't bringing the opinions of professional contrarians into the fold; we are bringing our best minds and strongest resources to bear in our decision making during the most challenging time for higher education since World War II.

At Augustana, we find ourselves in a strong position of hiring faculty members in an environment where the best and the brightest are looking for new academic homes. The strength of our governance model allows us the opportunity to hire faculty members who are committed to sharing in the governance of this institution. I can honestly say to our new faculty members that they will not only put their individual marks on their departments, but that they can collectively guide this college to new heights during these times of unprecedented societal changes.

Presidents and board chairs must work aggressively with board members to better communicate just how important faculty members are to their work in governance. We must motivate and engage our faculty members—not simply manage them—in our strategic-planning processes. Trustees can affirm the value of professors through their actions in the boardroom and through the policies they establish on their campuses.

Next, we need to challenge, at every opportunity, derogatory myths about faculty members and provide a more vigorous defense of the value of shared

governance to the outside world. Our defense of shared governance should extend past board meetings to students, donors, and policy makers. As we encourage our students to weigh in on the complex campus issues facing us, their participation will be enhanced when they understand that their opinions are but one vital part of shared governance.

When donors seek to bypass or usurp shared governance by attaching too many strings to their gifts—a practice that denies the faculty its important role in developing the details of academic programs—we must try to educate them about the importance of the faculty's contributions.

Finally, we must encourage legislators to resist the temptation to micromanage academic programs in exchange for state or federal support. Such overinvolvement jeopardizes the traditional independence of higher education, of which shared governance is a necessary component.

One final note of caution: Those presidents who, in order to strengthen their own positions, exploit faculty myths to foster the apprehension that often exists between boards and faculties are engaging in an easy, but ineffective, divide-and-conquer management style. I have observed that such a strategy doesn't work for long—eventually both the board and faculty will see through it.

Confronting the long-perpetuated legends that so wrongly denigrate and demean our faculties is imperative. Dispelling them is the least we can do as leaders in higher education.

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