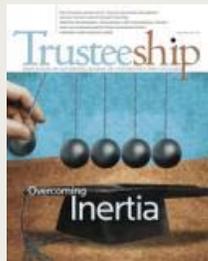


The Virtues of Student and Faculty

Trusteeship

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By Charles R. Middleton



Shared governance is one of the many distinguishing characteristics of quality in American higher education. It is based on the premise that all of us know more than a subset of us, and that you get better results when you consult broadly, especially with those who have a stake in the outcome of the discussion.

These notions moved powerfully across the country when I was just starting my career as a faculty member 40 years ago. In those days, it was the students who professed these views most persuasively. They did so knowing not only that it was important to speak truth to power, but knowing as well that it was better to be the power that spoke the truth.

As a result, students found their way into the governance structure at many institutions of higher education. No sector was exempt, as students became fairly common features of the landscape of board membership in both public and private, two-year and four-year institutions. Some of these early pioneers were "representatives" of the student body, empowered to attend board meetings but not to vote. But many were full board members, participating in the debates at the very least as junior colleagues and occasionally as full peers.

And why not? After all, everything that we do in higher education is about serving the students both academically and in their personal growth and development. What better way to accomplish that noble purpose than to have a student or two sitting in the room when the weightiest decisions about the future of the institution are being determined?

As for faculty participation and membership on governance boards, well, frankly, not so much. A recent AGB survey found that 14.9 percent of responding independent colleges (up from 10.7 percent in 1997) and 13.3 percent of public institutions (up from 3.4 percent in 1997) included at least one faculty member as a voting member of the board. In addition, 14.1 percent of independent and 9.7 percent of public institutions reported including a non-voting faculty member on the board. It's not that there are few faculty participants in board meetings. There are. There are frequent occasions for the truly outstanding members of an institution's faculty to present the results of their scholarship or creative work, or to showcase their teaching successes, or to share what they are doing to help strengthen the infrastructure of the campus to better serve students and faculty alike.

In those moments we can see at work a vital component of the president's agenda to assure that members of the board better understand why their decisions are so vital to the well-being of the enterprise. What better way to reinforce the importance of board decision making than to showcase evidence that demonstrates how prior decisions lay the foundations for current success and that decisions soon to be taken will help move the institution forward?

While current practices for exposing the board to faculty endeavors are well and good, there is more that can be done. The simplest additional step is to assure that there is a faculty representative on the board, that is to say a faculty member selected by his or her peers to represent the interests and views of the faculty at board meetings.

Of course, dilemmas will present themselves—for example when the elected representative faces the tension posed when the broader purposes of the institution trump the narrower interests of a part of it. Faculty representatives on boards must walk a fine line between advocacy of the faculty's interests and the occasional need to make other goals primary. If they fail to do so, it is almost certain that board members will come to see faculty trustees as being self-serving or worse. Thankfully, this is not common in our experience at Roosevelt University.

Our practice of having faculty members on the board grew out of the university's founding moment, when the faculty of the College of the Central YMCA in Chicago voted to resign en masse in 1945 to form its own institution, thanks especially to a supportive vote by the student body.

Small wonder, then, that when a governing board had to be created, the leaders of the founding faculty were among those at the table. I say leaders because the faculty didn't have just one seat, it had many. In an irony not lost on most of us, students fared less well, becoming members of the Roosevelt board with first one seat in the early 1990s and, subsequently, after the establishment of a second campus, with two seats.

Currently, students are nominated by the Student Government Association on each

Take Aways

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campus, selected from a short list by the board's trusteeship committee, and serve two-year staggered terms so that one experienced student trustee can mentor the new student board member. They contribute enormously to the quality of the discussions, especially in committees, and their views are actively sought, especially when not proactively given.

And it is a two-way street. Our student trustees, each with a full vote on all, and I mean all, matters, not only add leavening to the discussions. They also learn leadership skills that serve them well following graduation, as evidenced by how successful prior student trustees have been in a wide variety of fields and communities.

Faculty membership on the Roosevelt board of trustees, continuous from the founding moment in 1945, is as enduring as it is essential to the success of shared governance at the institution. Like outside trustees, faculty members serve three-year, staggered terms and can be re-elected. Elections to fill upcoming faculty vacancies take place at the last meeting of the university senate in the spring and are ratified by the board of trustees at its June meeting, but only upon the recommendation of the trusteeship committee.

These are merely the mechanics, however, born out of the history of the university and nurtured by the core values that guide all that we do and seek to accomplish. More important by far are the underlying assumptions about full student and faculty participation on all matters brought before the board. Full participation literally means just that. Like freedom and equality, it cannot be parsed. Either you are a trustee or you are not. And if you are, then you have both the authority and the accountability for your actions and all that you advocate and do.

On the surface, of course, absent other factors, this could well be a prescription for difficulty and even, on occasion, for disaster. One need not look too deeply into the experience of institutions of higher education over the past decades to find examples of both student and faculty representatives on governing boards who shook things up, and not always to the advantage of the institutions. Of course, one also need not look far to find examples of students and faculty members who had no presence on boards and who shook things up even more.

What lies behind our success and makes it replicable across the academy, I believe, is a powerful principle—one that actually is present on all high-functioning boards as exemplified by the AGB study of such boards currently under way. The principle is that the Roosevelt student and faculty trustees are not representatives of, respectively, the student body and the faculty. They are full trustees as provided for by law on a board that prides itself on bringing a broadly diverse set of professional and personal perspectives to bear on university issues. Faculty membership on the Roosevelt board of trustees, continuous from the founding moment in 1945, is as enduring as it is essential to the success of shared governance at the institution.

Put more prosaically, all trustees bring different backgrounds to board deliberations and thus enhance the quality of the discussions, expertise, and points of view presented. Their contributions reflect their life experience, their professional world views and skills, and their values as individuals. Student and faculty trustees fit nicely into the diversity of the board and provide unique perspectives in the deliberations.

When I arrived at Roosevelt eight years ago, I admit that I was skeptical about whether the theory could really be replicated in practice. Since then I have become a big fan of full faculty participation on the board, especially as an indicator of the level of shared governance—to which the institution is committed. In our case we have five faculty trustees, or just under 10 percent of the voting membership of the board. The faculty trustees come from diverse disciplines and, accordingly, see most issues through different lenses. Thus one of the advantages that accrues to our public trustees is learning that the faculty is hardly a monolith. A side effect is that public trustees come to appreciate better the challenges that the president and others face in leading the institution internally when complex issues are under discussion.

A second advantage of the presence of even a single faculty trustee is shared information about board deliberations. In the monthly meeting of the Roosevelt senate, the faculty trustees report on the work of the board, discussing what the current issues are and the rationales for why those issues matter to the institution as a whole.

In this process, the work of our board has been demystified. It is now seen as a part of the institution, with its own unique roles and responsibilities for assuring the general welfare, just as other groups in the university have their roles. On more than one occasion, I have heard a faculty trustee tell the other members of the senate how impressed they are with the level of dedication the outside trustees display to the university, noting that the outside trustees are all volunteers, too.

There is a third advantage. Over time, there are more and more faculty members who have served in this role. I calculate that I have personally worked with no fewer

than 15 such individuals, and I know that there are many more who served before I arrived at Roosevelt. This cadre of individuals experienced in how things really work at the highest levels of deliberation is a valuable component of the broader faculty's understanding of how issues are resolved at the board level. Consequently there is virtually no "we/they" discourse vis a vis our board and its relationship to other campus groups.

But what about the issue of keeping board deliberations on sensitive topics confidential when students and faculty are present? When the Roosevelt board goes into executive session, where sensitive matters are usually discussed, the student and faculty trustees participate fully. In my eight years as president, to my knowledge there has never been a breach of that confidentiality, and if there has been, it has certainly never led to any external discussion in any campus forum of the issues discussed privately at the board level. The probity of student and faculty trustees at Roosevelt is exemplary.

One final comment about the role of the president in this environment is in order. Every president has as his or her responsibility regularly engaging individual members of the governing board beyond the formal meetings. How this is done varies widely depending upon institutional type and the size of the board. As a general rule, board leaders usually hear more frequently from the president than general members, with the board chair—who has regular meetings with the president—being most engaged.

I have applied a version of this engagement to our faculty trustees and, to a lesser extent, to our student trustees. While I meet selectively with student trustees when there are issues about which I think they may wish to have particular and more in-depth information prior to a forthcoming meeting, I have found it useful to meet regularly with the five faculty trustees.

In these meetings, we discuss a wide array of issues. Since each faculty member typically is on a different board committee, these meetings give them an opportunity to discuss forthcoming issues with each other, and many issues cut across several committees. I also get to gauge their views on all matters and can provide them with relevant information that can expand their understanding of forthcoming discussions.

One side effect of these meetings is that I get to know these colleagues better in their professorial roles. We have very interesting conversations about their scholarly work and their teaching, and this has more often than not helped shape the board's ensuing deliberations on the academic program and on faculty issues generally.

A second effect is that we can use these sessions to develop strategies to engage the university community as a whole in forthcoming issues or regarding difficult current challenges. Not all such issues need to be introduced into campus discourse by the administration. Indeed, it is very helpful on many occasions to ask faculty trustees to make presentations on such challenges in the senate. Their credibility with their colleagues adds weight to every discussion and helps keep the debate focused on the issues.

Returning to my baseline theme of shared governance, boards and presidents would be well served, in my view, by closer integration of faculty and students into high-level institutional decision-making. The uniqueness of our governance system in American higher education, based as it is on self-governance and comparatively limited regulatory interference, has led to high quality and diversity across the academy. It is the marvel of the world, current challenges notwithstanding.

Because we already have shared governance on operational issues, with the size of the share depending upon the issue, the principle is already a key component of that success. Perhaps we could all strengthen governance even further by also sharing responsibility at the strategic level of the governing board. Certainly it is an idea worthy of discussion.

About the Author:

Charles R. Middleton is president of Roosevelt University in Chicago.