We tend to think about shared governance not so much when it is working well, but rather when it comes to a flashpoint. In 2014, shared governance reached a combustible state in two prominent cases.

In both Connecticut and Minnesota, major new initiatives to reform public higher education at the system level ran into fervid opposition from faculty. Key concerns include skepticism about online learning, fears about eroding curricula, and general opposition to centralization of authority at the system level. At the end of 2014, the Connecticut plan appeared stalled. In Minnesota, the state’s two faculty unions pulled out of discussions about the system’s proposed reforms.

While extreme, these examples underscore the challenges that administrators and faculty have in reaching common ground through shared governance. Realities like constrained appropriations, cost containment, and the increased use of contingent faculty further pressurize the challenges of working cooperatively on campus.

Administrators and faculty do not always agree, of course, on what topics even belong in shared governance in the first place. James Duderstadt, a prominent past president of the University of Michigan, spoke to the heart of that divide when he addressed leaders of research universities more than 12 years ago. Faculty governance, Duderstadt said, “…continues to be both effective and essential for academic matters...
such as curriculum development, faculty hiring, and tenure evaluation. But it is increasingly difficult to achieve true faculty participation in broader university matters such as finance, capital facilities, or external relations. The faculty traditions of debate and consensus building, along with the highly compartmentalized organization of academic departments and disciplines, seem incompatible with the breadth and rapid pace required in today’s high momentum university-wide decision environment. Most difficult and critical of all are those decisions that concern institutional transformation.

Such tensions seem eternal. Working at the nexus of sometimes opposing forces, university presidents must navigate between internal campus needs and politics and the world at large. The competing demands of multiple stakeholders intensify the challenges of making shared governance work. So a pivotal question might be this: How do presidents navigate the highly nuanced and complicated context of shared governance work? In other words, how do presidents make shared governance work?

Governance as a Spectrum

Karen Haynes, president of California State University San Marcos, views shared governance as a spectrum that extends from interest by some faculty to “share in all decisions and all aspects of the academy” to the perspective of administrators that, while faculty have important roles in core academic functions like developing curriculum, they should not necessarily be involved in all of a university’s decisions.

“Here we have tried, I think relatively successfully, to navigate those difficult waters,” Haynes says. “There is a lot of gray area where we hope that we can—through open forums, active engagement with our senate, and other forms of communication and consultation—have faculty input, but then make executive decisions and move forward.”

In 2014, the State University of New York at Fredonia received the state’s inaugural Shared Governance Award, a system-level honor that recognizes “outstanding contributions to the advancement of shared governance.”

Fredonia’s president, Virginia Schaefer Horvath, says the university earned the award based on such accomplishments as development of a new handbook on appointments, reappointments and promotions. That project involved a lengthy, sometimes rocky collaborative process that engaged many stakeholders, including union representatives at the system level. Other “wins,” Horvath says, include redesigning the strategic planning process to engage more university stakeholders and redrawing Fredonia’s mission statement to make it more relevant and useful.

Sometimes, of course, shared governance doesn’t work as well as might have been hoped. Haynes, for example, recalls a time when a series of resignations and retirements among deans opened a window for restructuring the university’s academic colleges. Through several cycles of consultations, faculty said they wanted the structures to stay the same. Administration disagreed, and eventually implemented changes. On reflection, Haynes isn’t sure if shared governance could have worked better in this case. “You never make everybody happy,” she says. “We tried consultation twice, but we just didn’t do what the consultation recommended, which was to do nothing. Faculty could not wrap their head around the fact that actually it was an executive decision in the end.”

Another example comes from Daniel J. Bradley, president of Indiana State University. The university’s provost decided that a faculty member needed to be essentially relieved of his responsibilities in mid-semester. Some faculty members thought that decision should have undergone an official inquiry as part of shared governance. Bradley said that under other circumstances the university might have taken that path, but in this case the administration felt it needed to move decisively and faster than a consultative approach would have required.

Practical Strategies

It takes unceasing effort to make shared governance operate effectively in practice. Through experience, however, AASCU presidents have developed a range of tools that they draw on to advance their collaborations with faculty. Insights from a number of leaders of AASCU institutions suggest several practical strategies.

Build trust. One key to making shared governance work is to build and maintain strong relationships with faculty leaders. “Trust develops over time and it develops by being truthful in what you’re saying and being consistent in your
behaviors,” Haynes says. Faculty may not like a decision, she adds, but they can respect it “if they trust the decision-makers.”

Bradley meets with faculty leaders once a month for wide-ranging private discussions that are more give-and-take than question-and-answer. “You have to remind faculty about who you are and where you came from,” he says. “They need to understand and have confidence in you as a person that you’re not doing things that are intrinsically damaging, or suggesting things that are damaging to their profession or their view of what the university should be.”

Let the process unfold…
Some stakeholders bemoan how long it takes to make decisions in academe, but the process of shared governance often does take time. “One of the things that drives people a little bit crazy at Fredonia is that we take a while to make decisions,” Horvath says. But as president and earlier as provost there, she learned that Fredonia’s stakeholders like to be included in deliberations from the beginning. Horvath intentionally does not use the term “buy in,” but rather talks about “build in,” by which she means patiently taking the time to give the right stakeholders ample opportunities to express their points of view.

…but set time limits. Presidents know, however, that deliberations cannot go on infinitely. Richard R. Rush, the president of California State University Channel Islands, says, “We try to structure things in a way the clock is going to run out.” Similarly, Bradley says, “Discussions have to come to an end, and there have to be decisions made.”

Listen. If it is important to invest the necessary time to hear people out in shared governance, it is equally important to listen carefully to what they have to say. Sue Henderson, president of New Jersey City University, says, “You need to listen a lot to key constituencies. What is going on in the senate? What does the union want?” Henderson makes a point of hearing what people have to say by lunching with faculty members, students, and other members of the university community. She also relies on her vice presidents to listen closely to what the campus community wants. Henderson says triangulating all that input helps her “understand the tenor of where people are and how willing they are to move forward with a given agenda.”

Respect diverse voices. Respect for all parties is a critical component in shared governance. At Fredonia, for example, shared governance is guided by a set of articulated values that include making sure that all campus voices—not just those of the administration and faculty—are heard. One principle is that participants in meetings “make every effort to elicit multiple—even conflicting—viewpoints.”

“It’s funny to me that people get sort of squeamish about shared governance,” Horvath says. “I don’t really get that. I think it makes things better when you have more people giving their opinion.”

Broaden perspectives. One of the common beefs about shared governance is that faculty, focused as they must be on their disciplines and departments, sometimes view the world too narrowly. Some presidents make it a point, therefore, to try to widen those lenses. Faculty “may not be familiar with the dimensions of what a president has to do in making a decision,” Rush says, suggesting that presidents take the time to help the faculty understand issues through a president’s eyes.

At CSU San Marcos, Haynes and her colleagues sponsor Campus Connect, in which 25 staff from across the university community are invited to spend the better part of one day a month over an academic year learning details about how campus units interconnect. The program “gives people a 30,000 foot view of the university,” Haynes says. One benefit is that program alumni become prime candidates for campus task forces and change initiatives.

Don’t expect complete consensus. In practice, absolute consensus is likely to remain illusory,
especially given the diversity of opinions on university campuses. Noting that there will always be naysayers, for example, Horvath says she aims for around 70 percent agreement as a signal that given decisions should go forward. That doesn't mean that she ignores those who disagree. Rather, she says, “I look carefully at the 30 percent who don't want to do something. What are their reasons? Are they going to be bringing something forward that we might later wish we had thought about?”

**Use tools at hand.** Sometimes effective shared governance can be advanced using tools that are already in a president's toolkit. At Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, for example, President Flavius C. Killebrew leverages the institution's strategic planning process to get different stakeholders on the same page. “People bring their own perspectives to the table,” he says, but through the strategic planning overlay “they are forced into seeing the bigger picture.” Killebrew says another essential is to “communicate, communicate, communicate.”

Bradley sometimes leverages the authority vested in Indiana States’ board of trustees. On several recent occasions, he says, the board has suggested certain changes, offered their ideas, and told the administration and faculty that they have a finite amount of time to either agree or provide an alternative. “One of the things that has worked well here is that the board has been willing to be the heavy when necessary,” Bradley says. “That has helped in many ways in terms of not letting the administration or the faculty think that there is an infinite amount of time” to come to a decision through shared governance.

**Be candid and transparent.** Shared governance works best when presidents speak with candor. “Sometimes shared governance goes astray when the campus leadership meets with faculty or hears from faculty and says they agree, and then goes and behaves differently,” Haynes observes. “You have to be able to say, I hear what you’re saying and I appreciate your perspective, but I disagree. And you cannot sugarcoat things.”

“You can never be too transparent in what you do,” Killebrew says. “You’ve really got to make sure that there’s no whiff of a situation that you’re trying to hide something or not being totally forthcoming.”

**Identify meaningful boundaries.** Presidents need to know when and how to draw appropriate borders around shared governance. Henderson, for example, cites building construction. While it is necessary and important to get faculty buy-in in the planning stages, once construction begins the president has to set boundaries so that architects and engineers can fulfill their roles without being micromanaged by too many stakeholders.

**Nurture a productive culture.** Some leaders cultivate a campus culture that supports cooperation. As founding president of CSU Channel Islands, for example, Richard Rush personally interviewed some 800 finalists for the institution’s faculty positions. He asked individuals to agree to principles like civility, collegiality, and “facilitating student success rather than being a gatekeeper.” Rush says he invites faculty to “help us build a university for the 21st century—not a program, but a university.” The same beliefs are outlined in offer letters to new faculty, underscoring what Rush terms “both an explicit and implicit agreement between us.” And while he says that “sometimes in the heat of battle, and in daily life, people forget about that and I need to remind them,” nonetheless the established principles help steer discussions of differences back to the key question of how they can be resolved to move the university forward.

**Ultimate Responsibility**

Ultimately, of course, the buck stops with the university leader. While faculty might have tenure, presidents can and do lose their jobs when leadership is not exercised well. Accordingly, even as they work within the framework of shared governance, university presidents have to be ready to make decisions and stand by them, even in the face of opposition. As Rush says, “I look for faculty input in the traditional way and see if it is valuable to what we are trying to accomplish. I try to respect the faculty position, but I’m not confined by it.”

Rush sums up the long and short of shared governance when with a chuckle he says, “Well, some days it is really good, and some days it is not quite as good.” Or as Haynes says, shared governance “is always a work in progress.”

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