

Governing the 21st Century University:
A View from the Bridge

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Introduction

The ultimate sacrifice for a former Michigan president: to give a talk in California at precisely the time of the Michigan-Ohio State game!!!

And on the topic of university governance, no less.

Some interesting quotes:

In the 1850s, when the current forms of lay board governance were established, the average American college had fewer than one hundred students and less than 1% of white males attended college. Over the past century, universities have evolved from a trustees-plus-president “imperium” to a more faculty-based hegemony to a somewhat more broadly based sovereignty that includes government (state and federal) and students.

Harold T. Shapiro¹

For years now the trustees of many colleges and universities have rolled over as academics and administrators within the institutions they’re supposed to govern have run amok. While trustees turn a blind eye, faculty and administrators have politicized and dumbed down the curriculum, instituted draconian speech and sexual-conduct codes that they have then enforced with all the liberalism of the Court of the Star Chamber, and instituted an immoral and often unconstitutional system of admissions apartheid.

Wall Street Journal²

In reality, the practice of shared governance—however promising its original intent—often threatens gridlock. Whether the problem is with presidents who lack the courage to lead an agenda for change, trustees who ignore the institutional goals in favor of the football team, or faculty members who are loath to surrender the status quo, the fact is that each is an obstacle to progress. If higher education is to respond effectively to the demands being placed upon it, the culture of shared governance must be reshaped.

National Commission on the Academic Presidency³

In an attempt to improve institutional effectiveness and accountability, a call goes out for stronger leadership, quicker decisions, and a more business-like approach to decision-making. Battles over who has decision-making authority over academic policy, technology, diversity, tenure, and administrative issues are growing in higher education.

William Tierney⁴

American universities have long embraced the concept of shared governance involving public oversight and trusteeship by boards of lay citizens, elected faculty governance, and experienced but generally short-term and usually amateur administrative leadership.

Despite dramatic changes in the nature of scholarship, pedagogy, and service to society, the university today is organized, managed, and governed in a manner little different from the far simpler colleges of the early twentieth century.

University governing boards comprised of lay citizens face a serious challenge in their attempts to understand and govern the increasingly complex nature of the university and its relationships to broader society.

This is made even more difficult by the politics swirling about and within governing boards, particularly in public universities, that not only distract boards from their important responsibilities and stewardship, but also discourage many of our most experienced, talented, and dedicated citizens from serving on these bodies.

The increasing intrusion of state and federal government in the affairs of the university, in the name of performance and public accountability, but all too frequently driven by political opportunism, can trample upon academic values and micromanage institutions into mediocrity.

While faculty governance continues to be both effective and essential for academic matters such as curriculum development, faculty hiring, and tenure evaluation, it is increasingly difficult to achieve true faculty participation in broader university matters such as finance, capital facilities, and external relations.

When faculty members do become involved in university-wide governance and decision-making, all too often they tend to become preoccupied with peripheral matters such as faculty compensation or intercollegiate athletics rather than strategic issues such as the protection of academic values or the proper balance among undergraduate, graduate, and professional education.

The faculty traditions of debate and consensus building, the highly fragmented and compartmentalized organization of academic departments, and the faculty's primary loyalty to their academic discipline and the marketplace rather than to their institution

seem increasingly incompatible with the breadth and rapid pace required to keep up with today's high momentum, high risk university-wide decision environment.

University presidents and other academic administrators are all too frequently caught between these opposing forces, between external pressures and internal campus politics, between governing boards and faculty governance, between a rock and a hard place.

Moreover, the imbalance between responsibility (considerable) and authority (modest) characterizing the contemporary university presidency inhibits strong, visionary leadership in higher education at a time when it is desperately needed.

Little wonder that most university administrators keep their heads low, avoiding making waves, and polish their resume for their next career step.

Today it is appropriate to question whether the key participants in shared governance—the lay governing board, elected faculty governance, and academic administrators—have the expertise, the discipline, and the authority, not to mention the accountability, necessary to cope with the powerful social, economic, and technological forces driving change in our society and its institutions.

1. Can boards comprised of lay citizens, with little knowledge either of academic matters or the complex financial, management, and legal affairs of the university be expected to provide competent oversight for the large, complex institutions characterizing American higher education?
2. What is the appropriate role for the faculty in university governance, and is this adequately addressed by the current determination and conduct of faculty governing bodies?
3. Can academics with limited experience in management serve as competent administrators (deans, provosts, presidents)?
4. And, finally (and most speculatively), what works, what does not, and what to do about it?

Before examining these issues, it is important to first stress a very important caveat. There is a quite remarkable diversity in the forms of governance used by American colleges and universities, since these have evolved from the history and traditions of a highly diverse collection of institutions.

Beyond the obvious differences between public and private universities, liberal arts colleges and research universities, and those with organized (unionized faculties) and those with traditional faculty anarchies, there are other strong differences even among institutions of quite similar academic characteristics.

Some institutions such as the University of California have long traditions of strong faculty governance at the campus-wide or system-wide level, while others such as the University of Michigan stress this role at the level of the academic unit through faculty executive committees, relying upon deans to address academic concerns at the university level.

Some states such as Ohio and North Carolina have statewide governing boards determining educational policy and funding priorities; others such as California rely on governing boards at the university system level working within the framework of carefully negotiated master plans; and some such as Michigan recognize through state constitution or state the autonomy of a unique governing board for each college and university.

Although this paper attempts to identify and address issues common to most colleges and universities, it is clearly influenced by the author's experience with large, public research universities such as the University of Michigan.

The Way Things Are Supposed to Work

In theory, shared governance allocates

- public accountability and stewardship to the governing board,
- academic matters to the faculty,
- and the tasks of leading and managing the institution to the administration.

Of course, from a legal perspective, “shared governance” is a misnomer. By law or by charter, essentially all of the legal powers of the university are held by its governing board.

The function of the lay board in American higher education is simple, at least in theory:

The governing board has final authority for key policy decisions and accepts both fiduciary and legal responsibility for the welfare of the institution. But because of its very limited expertise, it is expected to delegate the responsibility for policy development, academic programs, and administration to faculty members and other professionals with the necessary training and experience.

In the case of private institutions, governing boards are typically elected by alumni of the institution or self-perpetuated by the board itself. In public institutions, board members are determined by political mechanisms, either appointed by governors or through popular election.

Boards are expected first and foremost to act as trustees, responsible for the welfare of their institution. But, in many public institutions, politically selected board members tend to view themselves more as governors or legislators rather than trustees, responsible to particular political constituencies rather than simply to the welfare of the institution they serve. Instead of buffering the university from various political forces, they sometimes bring their politics into the boardroom and focus it on the activities of the institution.⁵

There are actually two levels of faculty governance in the contemporary university.

The key to the effective governance of the academic mission of the university is actually not at the level of the governing board or the administration but rather at the level of the academic unit, typically at the department or school level. At this level the faculty generally has a very significant role in most of the key decisions concerning who gets hired, who gets promoted, what gets taught, how funds are allocated and spent, and so on.

The second level of faculty governance occurs at the university level and usually involves an elected body of faculty representatives, such as an academic senate, that serves to debate institution-wide issues and advise the university administration. In sharp contrast to faculty governance at the unit level that has considerable power and influence, the university-wide faculty governance bodies are generally advisory on most issues, without true power.

Actually, there is a third level of informal faculty power and control in the contemporary research university, since an increasing share of institutional resources flow directly to faculty entrepreneurs as research grants and contracts from the federal government, corporations, and private foundations. These research programs act as quasi-independent revenue centers with very considerable influence, frequently at odds with more formal faculty governance structures such as faculty senates.

Like other complex organizations in business or government, the university requires a high level of professional management and administration.

While perhaps long ago universities were treated by our society--and its various government bodies--as largely well-intentioned and benign stewards of truth, justice, and the American way, today we find the university faces the same pressures, standards, and demands for accountability characterizing any other public corporation.

Of course, the term "university administration" sometimes has a sinister connotation to both faculty and governing boards alike, akin to the terms "federal government" or "bureaucracy" or "corporate organization." In reality, however, the university administration is simply a leadership network that extends throughout the university. As a general practice, those administrative officers responsible for academic programs (e.g., department chairs, dean, provosts) are generally selected from among the faculty and continue to have academic rank. Those responsible for various administrative, support, and business functions of the university such as finance, physical plant, and government relations generally have experience and training in these latter areas.

At the helm (on the bridge) of the American university is the president (or chancellor).

American university presidents are expected to develop, articulate, and implement visions for their institution that sustain and enhance its quality. Through their roles as

the chief executive officers of their institutions, they also have significant management responsibilities for a diverse collection of activities, ranging from education to health care to public entertainment (e.g., intercollegiate athletics).

Since these generally require the expertise and experience of talented specialists, the president is the university's leading recruiter, identifying talented people, recruiting them into key university positions, and directing and supporting their activities.

Furthermore, unlike most corporate CEOs, the president is expected to play an active role generating the resources needed by the university, whether by lobbying state and federal governments, seeking gifts and bequests from alumni and friends, or clever entrepreneurial efforts.

Harold Shapiro noted this role was most elegantly stated in a Harper's Magazine article of 1939: "A university president is supposed to go down town and get the money. He is not supposed to have ideas on public affairs; that is what trustees are for. He is not supposed to have ideas on education; that is what the faculty is for. He is supposed to go down town and get the money."⁶

The presidency of an American college or university is an unusual leadership position from another interesting perspective. Although the responsibility for everything involving the university usually floats up to the president's desk, direct authority for university activities almost invariably rests elsewhere.

There is a mismatch between responsibility and authority that is unparalleled in other social institutions. As a result, there are many, including many university presidents, who have become quite convinced that the contemporary university is basically unmanageable and unleadable.

The Challenges to Effective University Governance

Effective governance of social institutions is challenging enough during relatively stable periods. Today, however, powerful social, economic, and technological forces are driving rapid change in our society. These expose the flaws in our traditional forms of governance in higher education and threaten not only academic values but as well the public interest.

Complexity: The modern university is comprised of many activities, some nonprofit, some publicly regulated, and some operating in intensely competitive marketplaces. It teaches students; it conducts research for various clients; it provides health care; it engages in economic development; it stimulates social change; and it provides mass entertainment (athletics). The organization of the contemporary university would compare in both scale and complexity with many major global corporations. The very complexity of the university has made substantive involvement in the broader governance of the university problematic for all of the participants in shared governance.

Bureaucracy: The increased complexity, financial pressures, and accountability of universities demanded by government, the media, and the public at large have required stronger management than in the past.⁷ Yet as universities have developed the administrative staffs, policies, and procedures to handle such issues, they have also created a thicket of paperwork, regulations, and bureaucracy that has weakened the authority and attractiveness of academic leadership. Broad participation in university governance is hampered by bureaucratic policies and procedures and practices, along with the anarchy of committee and consensus decision-making.

The Pace of Change: Both the pace and nature of the changes occurring in our world today have become so rapid and so profound that our present social institutions—in government, education, and the private sector—are having increasing difficulty in even sensing the changes (although they certainly feel the consequences), much less understanding them sufficiently to respond and adapt. The academic tradition of extensive consultation, debate, and consensus building before any substantive decision is made or action taken poses a particular challenge in this regard, since this process is simply incapable of keeping pace with the profound changes swirling about higher education.

The Resistance to Change: In business, management approaches change in a highly strategic fashion, launching a comprehensive process of planning and transformation. In political circles, sometimes a strong leader with a big idea can captivate the electorate, building momentum for change. The creative anarchy arising from a faculty culture that prizes individual freedom and consensual decision-making poses quite a different challenge to the university. Most big ideas from top administrators are treated with either disdain (this too shall pass...) or ridicule. As Don Kennedy, former president of Stanford, noted, "The academic culture nurtures a set of policies and practices that favor the present state of affairs over any possible future. It is a portrait of conservatism, perhaps even of senescence."⁸

The Deterioration in the Quality of Governing Boards

Many university presidents believe—although they are understandably discrete in acknowledging—that one of their greatest challenges is protecting their institutions from their own governing boards.

In theory members of governing board are expected to serve as stewards for their institutions, advocates for higher education, and defenders of academic values. In practice there has been a pronounced shift in board roles in recent years toward a greater emphasis on oversight and public accountability.

This is particularly the case with the governing boards of public universities, determined as they are through partisan politics, and tending to view their roles more as overseers for the interests of body politic rather than as trustees for the welfare of the institution. As the politics of board selection have become more contentious, board members have increasingly advocated strong political agendas, e.g., to restructure the curriculum to stress a specific ideology or to reduce costs even at the expense of quality.

In a sense, governing boards have become conduits for many of the political issues swirling beyond the campus. Political factors have become more important than expertise or institutional commitment in determining governing board members and their agendas.

Beyond the dangers posed to their institutions, the burdens rogue governing boards place on their presidents is particularly severe: the amount of time required to accommodate the special interests of board members, the abuse presidents receive from board members with strong personal or political agendas, the increasing tentativeness presidents exhibit because they never know whether their boards will support or attack them.

And yet, the accountability of most lay board members is almost nonexistent. Once selected, board members generally serve for long terms, subject only to removal by recall action by the electorate, removal for malfeasance by the courts, or peer pressure from colleagues. There is ample evidence to suggest that for all practical purposes,

governing board members are effectively isolated from accountability for even the most blatant incompetence or grievous misbehavior.⁹

There is little doubt that the deterioration in the quality of governing boards, the confusion concerning their roles, and the increasingly political nature of their activities has damaged many public universities and threatens many others.

While perhaps superficially reassuring government leaders, the media, and the public that greater oversight and accountability is being exercised, the quality of leadership, faculty, and academic programs of many public universities is all too frequently at risk because of the political agendas of their board.

There used to be an old saying that no institution can be better than its governing board. Today, however, the counterpoint seems to apply to many public universities: A governing board is rarely as good as the institution it serves.

Elected Faculty Governance: Shared Governance or Shared Anarchy?

While faculty involvement in academic matters is essential for program quality and integrity, faculty participation in university-wide governance and leadership is problematic for many reasons.

1. First, as we have noted, the complexity of contemporary university hinders substantive faculty involvement in the broader governance of the university. On most campuses faculty suffer from a chronic shortage of information—and hence understanding—about how the university really works. In part, this arises because university administrations have attempted to shield the faculty and the academic programs from the forces of economic, social, and technology change raging beyond the campus. But there are deeper issues.
2. The faculty culture typically holds values that are not necessarily well aligned with those required to manage a complex institution. For example, the faculty values academic freedom and independence, while the management of the institution requires responsibility and accountability. Faculty members tend to be individualists, highly entrepreneurial lone rangers rather than the team players required for management. They tend to resist strong, visionary leadership and strongly defend their personal

status quo. It is frequently difficult to get faculty commitment to—or even interest in—broad institutional goals that are not necessarily congruent with personal goals.

3. There is yet another factor that mitigates against effective faculty governance. The fragmentation of the faculty into academic disciplines and professional schools, coupled with the strong market pressures on faculty in many areas, has created an academic culture in which faculty loyalties are generally first to their scholarly discipline, then to their academic unit, and only last to their institution. In reality, most faculty members care little about institution-wide issues that do not have direct relevance to their particular interests. This is not surprising, since most faculty members move from institution to institution, swept along by market pressures and opportunities, unlike most nonacademic staff that remain with a single university throughout their careers. Although faculty members decry the increased influence of administrative staff, it is their own academic culture, their preference for disciplinary loyalty rather than institutional loyalty, coupled with the complexity of the contemporary university that has led to this situation.
4. Beyond the fact that it is frequently difficult to get faculty committed to—or even interested in—broad institutional goals, there is an even more important element that prevents true faculty governance at the institution level. Responsibility and accountability should always accompany authority: deans and presidents can be fired; trustees can be sued or forced off governing boards (at least in private universities). Yet the faculty, through important academic traditions such as academic freedom and tenure, are largely insulated from the consequences of their debates and recommendations. It would be difficult if not impossible, either legally or operationally, to ascribe to faculty bodies the requisite level of accountability that would necessarily accompany executive authority.
5. Of course many of the most outspoken critics of faculty governance come from the faculty itself. They note with dismay that many of those elected to faculty governance seem more interested in asserting power and influence on matters outside the traditional concerns of the faculty, e.g., setting budget priorities, overseeing athletic departments, and setting policies in peripheral areas like plant operations and parking. Tragically it has been difficult to get faculty governance to focus on those areas clearly within their unique competence—curriculum, student learning, academic values and ethics. Little

wonder that many of our most outstanding faculty members are reluctant to become involved in the tedious committees and commissions generated by shared governance.

Turf Issues

Part of the difficulty with shared governance is its ambiguity. Although most members of the university community understand that it rests upon the delegation of authority from the governing board to the faculty in academic matters and to the administration in operational management, the devil in the details can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Turf problems abound.

All too frequently governing boards become involved in management details, ranging from meddling with highly visible activities such as intercollegiate athletics to tampering with the academic process (e.g., challenging tenure at the University of Minnesota or specifying curriculum at SUNY).

While faculty governance can work well in academic matters at the level of departments or schools, all too frequently faculty members attempt to extend their influence to broader issues beyond their responsibility or expertise. Of particular concern here is the tendency of faculty governing bodies to focus on the “p” issues: parking, pay, and the plant department—but, of course, rarely productivity.

In contrast to the tendency of boards to trample on academic turf, or faculty governance to become preoccupied with administrative trivia, there remain a wide range of important institutional issues that sometimes fall through the cracks. Examples include crisis management, long term strategic planning, and institutional transformation.

One of the key challenges to effective university governance is to make certain that all of the constituencies of shared governance—governing boards, administrations, and faculty—understand clearly their roles and responsibilities.

Some Prescriptions for Change

So, what to do? In the spirit of stimulating debate and fully aware that this may be simply tilting with windmills, it seems appropriate to offer several suggestions:

Some Fundamental Principles

First, it is useful to begin with several key principles. University leadership and governance, management and decision-making should always reflect the fundamental values of the academy, e.g., freedom of inquiry, an openness to new ideas, a commitment to rigorous study, and a love of learning. Yet, these processes should also be willing to consider and capable of implementing institutional change when necessary to respond to the changing needs of our society.

Luc Weber, former rector at the University of Geneva suggests that higher education would do well to draw their attention two concepts from the economic theory of federalism that was developed to address the challenges faced by the European Economic Community.¹⁰

First one should stress the importance of externality in all decisions, that is, that the benefits or costs of a decision accrue not only to the members of the community that makes it but also to the broader community it serves. In America we would recognize this as a “customer-oriented” strategy, focusing on those we serve.

Second, a principle of subsidiarity should characterize governance in which all decisions ought to be made at the lowest possible level. Efforts to decentralize budget authority in an effort to provide strong incentives for cost containment and entrepreneurial behavior is a good example of this philosophy. That is, one should strive to decentralize both authority and responsibility to the lowest possible level, to those closest to the action in teaching and scholarship. Centralization is a very awkward approach to higher education during a time of rapid change.

Structural Issues

While it is probably impolitic to be so blunt, the simple fact is that the contemporary university is a *public corporation* that must be governed, led, and managed with competence and accountability to benefit its various stakeholders. Its broad responsibilities can best be served by a governing board that is comprised and functions as a true board of directors. Like the boards of directors of publicly-held corporations, the university’s governing board should consist of members selected for their expertise and experience, as well as their loyalty to the institution. They should govern the university in ways that serve both the long term welfare of the institution as well as the more immediate interests of the various constituencies it serves.

The academic tradition of extensive consultation, debate, and consensus building before any substantive decision can be made or action taken is yet another challenge. To be sure, the voluntary culture (some would say anarchy) of the university responds better to a process of consultation, communication, and collaboration than to the command-control-communication process familiar from business and industry. However this process is simply incapable of keeping pace with the profound changes facing effective governance of the public university. Not everything is improved by making it more democratic.

The leadership of the university must be provided with the authority commensurate with its responsibilities. Academic leaders, whether at the level of department chairs, deans, vice-presidents, or even the president, should have the same degree of authority to take actions, to select leadership, to take risks and move with deliberate speed, that their counterparts in both the corporate world and government enjoy. The challenges and pace of change faced by the modern university no longer allow the luxury of “consensus” leadership, at least to the degree that “building consensus” means seeking the approval of all concerned communities before action is taken. Nor do our times allow the reactive nature of special interest politics to rigidly moor the university to an obsolete status quo, thwarting efforts to provide strategic leadership and direction.

While academic administrations generally can be drawn as conventional hierarchical trees, in reality the connecting lines of authority are extremely weak. In fact, one of the reasons for cost escalation in higher education is the presence of a deeply ingrained academic culture in which leaders are expected to “purchase the cooperation” of subordinates, to provide them with positive incentives to carry out decisions. For example, deans expect the provost to offer additional resources in order to gain their cooperation on various institution-wide efforts. Needless to say, this “bribery culture” is quite incompatible with the trend toward increasing decentralization of resources. As the central administration relinquishes greater control of resource and cost accountability to the units, it will lose the pool of resources that in the past was used to provide incentives to deans, directors, and other leaders to cooperate and support university-wide goals.

Hence, it is logical to expect that both the leadership and management of universities will need increasingly to rely on lines of true authority just as their corporate counterparts. That is, presidents, executive officers, and deans will almost certainly have to become comfortable with issuing clear orders or directives from time to time. So, too, throughout the organization,

subordinates will need to recognize that failure to execute these directives will likely have significant consequences, including possible removal from their positions. Here I am not suggesting that universities adopt a top-down corporate model inconsistent with faculty responsibility for academic programs and academic freedom. However, while collegiality will continue to be valued and honored, the modern university simply must accept a more realistic balance between responsibility and authority.

Clearly an effort should be made to rebuild leadership strength at middle levels within the university, both by redesigning such positions to better balance authority and responsibility, and by providing leadership development programs. This may involve some degree of restructuring the organization of the university to better respond to its responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities.

Restructuring Governing Boards

Needless to say, such accountability starts at the top, at the level of the university's governing board. Nothing is more critical to the future success of higher education than improving the quality and performance of boards of trustees.

For public boards the need is particularly urgent. As long as the members of the governing boards of public universities continue to be determined through primarily political mechanisms, without careful consideration of qualifications or institutional commitment, and are allowed to pursue political or personal agendas without concern for the welfare of their institution or its service to broader society, the public university will find itself increasingly unable to adapt to the needs of a rapidly changing society.

As the contemporary university becomes more complex and accountable, it may be time to set aside the quaint American practice of governing universities with boards comprised of lay citizens, with their clearly inadequate expertise and all too frequent political character, and instead shift to true boards of directors similar to those used in the private sector. Although it may sound strange in these times of scandal and corruption in corporate management, it is nevertheless my belief that university-governing boards should function with a structure and a process that reflects the best practices of corporate boards. Corporate board members are selected for their particular expertise. They are held accountable to the shareholders for the performance of the corporation. Their performance is reviewed at regular intervals, both within the board itself and through more external measures such as company financial performance.

Clearly directors can be removed either through action of the board or shareholder vote. Furthermore, they can be held legally and financially liable for the quality of their decisions—a far cry from the limited accountability of the members of most governing boards for public universities.

While it is important to provide board members with sufficient tenure to develop an understanding of the university, it is also important to avoid excessively long tenures. It is probably wise to limit university board service to a single term, since this would prevent members from “campaigning” during their tenure for future appointment or election to additional terms.

Again drawing on the experience of corporate boards, let me make the more radical suggestion that university presidents in universities should have some influence over the selection of board members, just as their colleagues in private universities and CEOs in the corporate sector. Here I am not proposing that university presidents actually nominate or select board members. But consideration should be given to their right to evaluate and possibly veto a proposed board member if the individual is perceived as unduly political, hostile, or just simply inexperienced or incompetent.

It is my belief that all university governing boards, both public and private alike, would benefit greatly from the presence of either active or retired university presidents, senior administrators, and distinguished faculty members from other institutions among their membership. Since the experience of most lay board members is so far removed from the academy, it seems logical to suggest that boards would benefit from the experience such seasoned academicians might bring. After all, most corporate boards find it important to have experienced business leaders, either active or retired, among their membership. University boards should do the same.

An equally controversial variation on this theme would be to provide faculty with a stronger voice in true university governance by appointing faculty representatives as members of the governing board. This would be similar, in a sense, to the practice of some corporate boards in providing a seat for a representative from organized labor. However, there would need to be a clear sense of accountability and liability in such an appointment, so that the faculty board members would not simply become advocates for the faculty position and instead be responsible to the entire institution.

Every effort should be made to convince leaders of state government that politics and patronage have no place in the selection of university governing boards or efforts to determine their administrative leadership. Quality universities require quality leadership. Even as public university governing boards have become increasingly political and hence sensitive to special interests, they have also become increasingly isolated from accountability with respect to their quality and effectiveness. Not only should all boards be subject to regular and public review, but also the quality and effectiveness of governing boards should be an important aspect of institutional accreditation.

Some Proposals for Strengthening Faculty Governance

Perhaps the simplest approach to identifying possible reforms in faculty governance is to examine where it seems to work well and why.

From my own experience—as a faculty member, a former member of faculty governance at both the academic unit and university level, and a has-been university president—faculty governance seems to work best when focused upon academic matters such as faculty searches, promotion and tenure decisions, and curriculum decisions.

Why? Because the rank and file faculty members understand clearly that not only do they have the authority to make these decisions, but that these decisions are important to their academic departments and likely to affect their own teaching and research activities. As a result, the very best faculty members, namely those with strongest reputations and influence, are drawn into the academic governance process, either through formal election or appointment to key committees (hiring, promotion, tenure, curriculum, executive) or at least consulted for influential opinions in their role as department “mandarins”.

In sharp contrast, most active faculty members view university-wide faculty governance bodies such as faculty senates as primarily debating societies, whose opinions are invariably taken as advisory by the administration and the governing board. Hence, rare is the case when a distinguished faculty member will spare the time from productive scholarship, teaching, or department matters for such university service. Of course there are exceptions, but more common is the squeaky wheel syndrome, where those outspoken faculty members with an axe to grind are drawn to faculty politics, frequently distracting faculty governance from substantive issues to focus instead on their pet agendas.

Hence the key to effective faculty governance is to provide faculty bodies with executive rather than merely advisory authority, thereby earning the active participation of the university's leading faculty members. Advisory bodies, paid only lip service by the administration or the board of trustees, will rarely attract the attention or engage the participation of those faculty most actively engaged in scholarship and teaching.

A Balance of Interests and Influence

Shared governance is, in reality, an ever-changing balance of forces involving faculty, trustees, and administration.¹¹ Yet at a deeper level, it represents the effort to achieve a balance among academic priorities and values, public responsibility and accountability, and financial, management, and political realities.

But different universities achieve this balance in quite different ways. For example, at the University of California a strong tradition of campus and system-wide faculty governance is occasionally called upon to counter the political forces characterizing the governing board, examples being the loyalty oath controversy of the 1950s, the Reagan takeover of the UC Board of Regents in the 1960s, and the debates over the use of affirmative action in student admission during the 1990s.

In contrast, at the University of Michigan, campus-wide faculty governance has historically been rather weak, at least compared to faculty influence through executive committee structures at the department, school, and college level. Hence the tradition has been to develop a strong cadre of deans, both through aggressive recruiting and the decentralization of considerable authority to university's schools and colleges, and then depend upon these academic leaders to counter the inevitable political tendencies of the university's regents from time to time.

Where is the influence of the university administration—and particularly the president—in this balancing act? Usually out of sight or perhaps out of mind. After all, senior administrators including the president serve at the pleasure of the governing board and are also mindful of faculty support since they may be only one vote of no confidence away from receiving their walking papers. While it has always been necessary for the American university president to champion the needs of the academic community to the board and the broader society while playing a role in ensuring that the academic community is in touch with society's interests and

needs, it is also not surprising that the administration is usually quite reticent to get caught publicly in skirmishes between the governing board and the faculty.

The danger of such a bilateral balance of power arises when one party or the other is weakened. When the faculty senate loses the capacity to attract the participation of distinguished faculty members, or when a series of poor appointments at the level of deans or executive officers weaken the administration, a governing board with a strong political agenda can move into the power vacuum. Of course there have also been numerous examples of the other extreme, in which a weakened governing board caved into unrealistic faculty demands, e.g. by replacing merit salary programs with cost-of-living adjustments or extending faculty voting privileges to part-time teaching staff in such a way as to threaten faculty quality.

It All Comes Back to Values

In any consideration of how our universities are governed and led, it is important to always begin with the basics, to launch a careful reconsideration of the key roles and values of the university that should be protected and preserved during a period of change.

For example, how would an institution prioritize among roles such as educating the young (e.g., undergraduate education), preserving and transmitting our culture (e.g., libraries, visual and performing arts), basic research and scholarship, and serving as a responsible critic of society?

Similarly, what are the most important values to protect? Clearly academic freedom, an openness to new ideas, a commitment to rigorous study, and an aspiration to the achievement of excellence would be on the list for most institutions. But what about values and practices such as shared governance and tenure? Should these be preserved? At what expense? We need to act in such a way as to preserve our core missions, characteristics, and values.

Only a concerted effort to understand the important traditions of the past, the challenges of the present, and the possibilities for the future can enable institutions to thrive during a time of such change.

Some Final Observations

It is my belief that the complexity of the contemporary university and the forces acting upon it have outstripped the ability of the current shared governance system of lay boards, elected faculty bodies, and inexperienced academic administrators to govern, lead, and manage.

Today far too many colleges and universities find that the most formidable forces controlling their destiny are political in nature—from governments, governing boards, public opinion, and, at times, even faculty governance bodies.

Many of my university president colleagues—particularly those associated with public universities—believe that the greatest challenge and threat to their institutions arises from the manner in which their institutions are governed, both from within and from without.

Universities have a style of governance that is more adept at protecting the past than preparing for the future.

It seems clear that the university of the twenty-first century will require new forms of governance and leadership capable of responding to the changing needs and emerging challenges of our society and its educational institutions.

To be sure, shared governance models still have much to recommend them, at least in theory if not in practice. The contemporary university has many activities, many responsibilities, many constituencies, and many overlapping lines of authority that are well addressed by the tradition of public oversight and trusteeship, shared collegial internal governance of academic matters, and, experienced administrative leadership.

Yet the increasing politicization of governing boards, the ability of faculty senates to use their powers to promote special interests, delay action, and prevent reforms; and weak, ineffectual, and usually short-term administrative leadership all pose risks to the university. While shared governance may have much to recommend it, it must be adapted to a new time and new challenges.

Governing board members should be selected for their expertise in areas related to the nature of higher education and the contemporary university and commitment to the welfare of the institution.

Trustees should be challenged to focus on policy development rather intrude into management issues.

Their role is to provide the strategic, supportive, and critical stewardship for their institution and to be held clearly publicly, legally, and financially accountable for their performance and the welfare of their institutions.

The faculty senate should become a true participant in the academic decision process rather than simply a watchdog on the administration or defenders of the status quo.

Faculty governance should focus on those issues of most direct concern to academic programs, and faculty members should be held accountable for their decisions.

Faculties also need to accept and acknowledge that strong leadership, whether from chairs, deans, or presidents, is important if their institution is to flourish during a time of significant change.

Our institutions must not only develop a tolerance for strong leadership; they should demand it.

The contemporary American university presidency also merits a candid reappraisal and likely a thorough overhaul.

The presidency of the university may indeed be one of the more anemic in our society, because of the imbalance between responsibility and authority, the cumbersome process used to select university leaders, and the increasing isolation of “professional” academic administrators from the core teaching and scholarship activities of the university.

Yet it is nevertheless a position of great importance, particularly from the perspective of the long-term impact a president can have on an institution.

In conclusion, it is simply unrealistic to expect that the governance mechanisms developed decades or even centuries ago can serve well either the contemporary university or the society it serves.

To assign the fate of these important institutions to inexperienced and increasingly political lay governing boards isolated from accountability is simply not in the public interest.

Furthermore, during such times of dramatic change, we simply must find ways to cut through the Gordian knot of shared governance, of indecision and inaction, to allow our colleges and universities to better serve our society.

To blind ourselves to these realities is to perpetuate a disservice to those whom we serve, both present and future generations.

¹ Harold T. Shapiro, "University Presidents—Then and Now", in *Universities and Their Leadership*, edited by William G. Bowen and Harold T. Shapiro (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) pp. 65-99.

² Wall Street Journal Editorial (2/26/01) "Trust the Trustees".

³ National Commission on the Academic Presidency, Renewing the Academic Presidency: Stronger Leadership for Tougher Times, (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1996).

⁴ William Tierney, "Taking a Closer Look at Governance" (USC Navigator, 2002).

⁵ National Commission on the Academic Presidency, Renewing the Academic Presidency: Stronger Leadership for Tougher Times, (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1996).

⁶ Harold T. Shapiro, "University Presidents—Then and Now", in *Universities and Their Leadership*, edited by William G. Bowen and Harold T. Shapiro (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) pp. 65-99

⁷ Frederick E. Balderston, Managing Today's University: Strategies for Viability, Change, and Excellence (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 398.

⁸ Donald Kennedy, "Making Choices in the Research University," the American Research University, *Daedalus*, 122, no. 4 (1993): 127-56.

⁹ Richard T. Ingram, *Transforming Public Trusteeship*, Public Policy Paper Series (Washington, D.C.: Association of Governing Boards, 1998).

¹⁰ Luc E. Weber, "Critical University Decisions and Their Appropriate Makers: Some Lessons from the Economic Theory of Federalism", Governance in Higher Education: The University in a State of Flux, ed. by Werner Z. Hirsch and Luc E. Weber (Economica, London, 2001) pp. 79-93.

¹¹ Nannerl O. Keohane, "More Power to the President?", in The Presidency, (American Council on Education, 1998), 12-18.