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ABSTRACT

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The Provost's View of the Value of Faculty Led Decision-Making

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Abstract

The provost is typically seen as the chief academic officer of an institution, and has a great deal of control over how faculty are involved in academic decision-making. Using a three-round Delphi survey, a group of 20 provosts identified and rated 20 dimensions to the value of faculty involvement in governance. These leaders agreed most strongly with the perspective that shared faculty governance strengthens democratic principles at work, and liberal arts provosts tended to view shared governance as a cultural norm while research-oriented university provosts viewed governance as a tool of institutional work.

Faculty involvement in governance activities play an important role in higher education operations. These operations have come to be reliant on shared governance activities as mechanisms for both solving structural and procedural problems, and also to create the esprit de corps necessary for large organizations to function efficiently (McCormack, 1995; Mortimer & McConnell, 1978). Shared authority derives its success and power from within itself and its organization, and through the granting of power and decision-making authority from the senior academic officer of an institution, typically a provost or similar vice president for academic affairs.

Faculty involvement takes on many shapes and forms, ranging from the traditional faculty council or senate, to town-hall meetings that resemble populist behavior. Involvement alludes to the construct of equal voices sharing in the responsibility of decision-making, outlining procedures and policy as well as the challenges that face the institution on a daily basis. Shared authority, while time consuming and often problematic in creating pure consensus (Evans, 1999), does afford the college administrator an opportunity to create a feeling of ownership and shared commitment to the issues and decisions at hand (Birnbaum, 1991).

Faculty involvement in governance is neither easy nor smooth, regardless of who and where the involvement is attempted. Faculty are specialists, those best and brightest, who are compensated in many different ways to provide instruction and research expertise to their appointed fields. Involvement is a task, a duty, and relies on a personal sense of responsibility to an institution. Faculty senates typically are not forums for

hostile issues, but can serve as a mechanism to showcase the internal disagreement of the institution (Rosovsky, 1990).

The role of the provost in faculty-led decision-making has primarily been explored through personal narratives and some best practice reporting. Broadly, a provost relies on a board or directors of trustees to spell out a range of rights and responsibilities for various decision-making bodies, such as the campus president and institutional faculty members. The provost, then, serves as a form of faculty senate whip or individual to muster senate support or introduce issues.

The current study was designed to explore the perspective of provosts and vice presidents of academic affairs on the value of faculty involvement in governance. Using a Delphi survey method, provosts were asked about their perceived value of faculty involvement in governance and how these bodies can contribute to institutional decision-making. From these responses, provosts will be better able to conceptualize and indeed utilize faculty senates to build consensus on difficult issues while simultaneously impacting institutional morale.

### Background of the Study

Over 50 years ago Scroggs (1949) outlined a most basic tenet of college administration: “the president is the board’s administrative agent through whom the college is operated” (p. 443). He went on to describe an internal administrative structure for academic personnel and curriculum headed, traditionally, by a provost, vice president for academic affairs, or dean of a faculty. This view of a provost’s role is and has changed though, as the function of college presidents evolves to a heightened external focus. The result is a greater internal allocation of responsibility and authority in the

provost position. As Rosovsky (1990) argued, however, the presidential position has final authority on decision-making, particularly on academic personnel matters, and is responsible for the multiple standards of an institution. Tied to funding levels and public accountability, the fundamental work of the college president has changed to be more external in nature. Fund raising, legislative relations, media and board relations, and foundation development all require more of the contemporary president than in the past. The subsequent result is the allocation of certain responsibilities to the 'next in charge,' the provost.

The vice president for academic affairs, also commonly referred to as "provost," has direct responsibility for faculty, curriculum, and degree programs. Increasingly, these administrators have responsibility for student affairs issues, enrollment services, articulation agreements, institutional assessment, and in some instances, the international delivery of programs. Despite the broad menu of areas of work, the academic offerings, the pedagogy, and content of the institution are the primary domains of the provost.

As early as 1870, Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard appointed the first "dean" to relieve himself of some of the burdens of administration. This individual would be an active faculty member who would also serve in an administrative capacity (Eliot, 1908). With this new delineation of responsibilities, as well as with higher education becoming more complex and serving more students, the dean of the college became even more prevalent. One of the driving reasons for this emergence was due to the evolving president's role. The president has become more of an external officer who is responsible for raising funds and external representation (Birnbaum, 1992). Thus, the dean has become the internal leader of the campus by serving as a second in command

during the absence of the president and assuming authority for institutional operations (Dickeson, 1999).

The dean of the college or academic dean is now a significant part of every institution with various names used to identify the position. As early as the 1960's the title "provost" was used to identify the individual who filled the position of the chief academic officer at research universities. However, at state-supported colleges and universities and moderate sized private institutions, the title of "vice president of academic affairs" or "academic vice president" was more commonly used. These terms, as well as "dean of faculties," have been used interchangeably since that period to describe the position (Enarson, 1968). The position's role has expanded since the 1970's to include not only academic oversight, but other functional units on many campuses as well (Martin, Samels, & Associates, 1997).

Gould (1968) found that a majority of chief academic officers (CAO) had no formal training in administration, had stopped teaching, and had no experience when they were appointed. He further noted that they characterized their responsibilities in terms of importance as follows: (1) faculty relations and morale; (2) recruitment of faculty; (3) curriculum work; (4) budget, promotion, personnel evaluation; (5) committee work; (6) routine administration; and (7) student counseling. Wolverton (1984) further enhanced the role of the CAO position by comparing it with the mythological "argus" with many eyes that are always alert and able to react at any given time. This analogy was used to describe the complex nature of the position and its interactions with various constituents including the chief executive officer or president and governing board, deans and others who report directly to the CAO, institutional peers who have responsibilities in student,

financial, administrative, development, and other affairs, and others, such as assistant vice-presidents, associate and assistant deans, and assistants to the president. These relationships must be managed from a variety of perspectives including a campus view of faculty, students, and curricula, a system view to address issues related to campus mission, operations, and outcomes, and a national review to identify current trends within the profession.

The extent to which a provost makes use of a faculty governance unit varies greatly. The rationale for inclusion of faculty senates in the work of the provost's office can include the generation of new and exciting ideas, building support for new programs or initiatives, and to create a sense of ownership among faculty for decision-making results (Rosovsky, 1990). The reliance on faculty to make decisions, however, implies an investment of power to faculty. This construct of faculty co-governance is not broadly accepted, however. Aronowitz (2000) noted of the evolving nature of the college campus that "...faculty feel like employees rather than members of communities devoted to common intellectual concerns" (p. 67). This change in mindset has come largely due to a corporate model being imposed on the idea of college, that faculty "[I]n consideration of their new, proletarianized status, many have joined unions and converted their faculty senates into adversarial bodies" (p. 67).

The relationship between faculty, the provost, and ultimately the college president begins to resemble, then, the political structure of a state-federal government relationship. While a national leader has ultimate authority of a set of issues, the state-level leader has many more operational responsibilities. The analogy, then, holds that a provost resembles a state governor, responsible for the implementation of work and rewards

necessary for the institution to operate. The extent that faculty are involved has importance in terms of constituent buy-in as well as creative problem solving, and ultimately, has an impact on institutional morale.

The current study sought to distill this notion further, and to identify what provosts think about or how they see faculty co-governance. As a largely undocumented domain of research in faculty involvement in governance, the study was designed as exploratory, laying a framework for further inquiry.

### Research Procedures

As an exploratory study of the provost position and faculty senates, a Delphi survey was utilized with a purposive sample of 20 provosts. The provosts were selected from liberal arts institutions (n=10) and research focused universities (n=10). Criteria for selection were (1) geographic diversity, (2) the institution's use of a faculty senate as evidenced by a publicly-accessible website, and (3) a willingness to participate once the institution was identified.

The initial survey was mailed to the sample of provosts in the fall of 2000. The question for the provosts to respond to was: "what is your perspective, as provost, on the value of faculty involvement in governance?" Participants were asked to use a few words, a few sentences, bullets, or even a paragraph to respond to the question. Follow up telephone calls and e-mail reminders were used to assure the response of all members of the sample.

After all 20 round one surveys were received, all responses were separated into individual ideas, totaling 34 items. After eliminated for duplication, 20 items remained to

be rated in the second round of the Delphi. In the second round, participants were asked to rate their agreement with each item so that a rating of 3 would mean that they agreed that the statement was an accurate, true, and important component of the value of faculty involvement in governance. A rating of 2 indicated neither agreement nor disagreement, and 1 indicated disagreement with the statement.

Again using follow-up telephone calls and email messages, all 20 participants responded to the second round survey. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed and included on the round three survey instrument, which was mailed to all study participants. Provosts were asked to consider group data and re-rate their responses. Using the same follow-up strategy, all 20 provosts responded to the third round survey.

### Results

After completion of data collection, mean scores were computed for each survey item. For the liberal arts institution provosts, 10 items were rated with a mean score of 2.8 or higher on the 3-point Likert-type scale. These provosts provided an overall mean rating of 2.71 for all 20 items, and had six items that were rated a "3" by all ten provosts (see Table 1). This complete consensus was noted on the following perspectives: governance implies shared ownership, faculty focus should be on teaching, scholarship, and advising, good faculty involvement actually spreads the workload around and allows more work to get done, faculty governance is more essential now than ever, faculty involvement increases understanding of university strengths and weaknesses, and faculty involvement strengthens democratic principles at work.

Collectively this consensus alludes to an attention to the functions and content of shared governance units, and implies that communication, while essential, is not guaranteed to be two-way. The high rating of items, though, does reflect an environment or culture, from the perspective of the provost, that faculty involvement in governance is important and is part of the institutional fabric. This is perhaps best reflected in the complete consensus on perspective about faculty governance being more important now than ever before.

Provosts from research-oriented universities rated 11 of the items as 2.8 or higher, had an overall mean rating for the 20 items of 2.66, and three of the items had complete consensus as evidenced by a rating of 3 by all ten provosts. Overall, the 20 items were given a mean rating of 2.69, with seven items having a mean rating of 2.8 or higher. The complete consensus items for these provosts were: faculty buy-in is essential to policies being effectively implemented, faculty governance has a tradition in curricular issues, and faculty involvement strengthens democratic principles at work. The implication from these ratings is that research-oriented university provosts see faculty governance as a functionary process that has a role in decision-making, largely curricular, and while there may not be an implicit tight coupling in decision-making, involvement does have the potential for a positive effect on the institution.

Three significant differences were identified between the mean ratings of items between the provosts at liberal arts and research-oriented universities, with the liberal arts provosts rating two of the three items higher. Research institution provosts agreed more strongly with faculty governance is necessary for a sense of fairness (2.90 mean as compared to 2.30 mean) than liberal arts provosts. Liberal arts provosts agreed more

strongly with faculty focus should be on teaching, scholarship, and advising, and faculty governance is more essential now than ever (3.0 for both as compared to 2.3 and 2.3, respectively).

### Discussion

The roles and responsibilities of the provost have developed and increased exponentially since the early origins of the position in the late nineteenth century. The provost position, with broad responsibilities for the academic welfare of the institution, is now significant in daily operations at many institutions due to the increased necessity of the president to serve in an external capacity. Despite their origins and in some cases present status as faculty members, the provost's administrative decisions do not necessarily represent those of the faculty as a whole. This reality makes it important to understand their perceptions of how and why faculty should be involved in the governance process. This study explored the perspectives of these leaders from institutions with two distinct types of missions to determine their notions of shared governance.

Provosts reported high levels of agreement that faculty governance is important to an institution. Although institutional-type may have some bearing on how provosts view faculty-led decision-making, the differences were minimal, but were reflected in the general nature of responses. Collectively this consensus alludes to an attention to the functions and content of shared governance units, and implies that communication, while essential, is not guaranteed to be two-way. The high rating of items, though, does reflect an environment or culture, from the perspective of the provost, that faculty involvement

in governance is important and is part of the institutional fabric. This is perhaps best reflected in the complete consensus on the perspective regarding faculty governance being more important now than ever before.

Largely, liberal arts provosts viewed shared decision-making as a cultural reflection of an institution, while research-oriented university provosts tended to view shared governance as a tool for decision-making. These differences were subtle in the context of the current study, and certainly are in need of further extrapolation.

Liberal arts provosts also seemed to value the participation of faculty members in the governance process to spread the workload. At many of their institutions, which typically are smaller than the research institutions, the necessity for this type of activity is significant in accomplishing duties and making decisions where administrators are limited. This also promotes another statement that this group of provosts rated highly, which was shared ownership.

Perhaps one of the strongest findings of the study was the identification that provosts view faculty involvement as a mechanism for strengthening democratic principles at work. There was total consensus from both groups of provosts regarding this statement. This is significant in light of faculty mistrust of administrators (Birnbaum, 1991). Despite their apparent detachment from the desires of the faculty due to their administrative roles, this demonstrates that provost continue to appreciate the concept of shared governance. If higher education truly has an empowering history of social justice, then the notion of shared governance is certainly consistent with reinforcing that history.

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Table 1.

## Provost's Perspective on the Value of Faculty Involvement in Governance

Perspective	Liberal Arts Mean (SD)	Research Mean (SD)	Overall Mean (SD)	<i>f</i> <i>prob</i>
Faculty governance is almost a redundancy.	1.60 (.516)	1.50 (.707)	1.55 (.604)	.722
Faculty involvement in governance is absolutely essential.	2.60 (.516)	2.60 (.699)	2.60 (.598)	1.000
Faculty buy-in is essential to policies being effectively implemented.	2.70 (.483)	3.00 (.000)	2.85 (.366)	.0652
Governance implies shared ownership.	3.00 (.000)	2.80 (.421)	2.90 (.307)	.1510
Mission of the institution moves forward because of shared ownership.	2.60 (.516)	2.40 (.843)	2.50 (.688)	.5305
Faculty governance is absolutely crucial if there is to be buy-in to policy outcomes.	2.80 (.421)	2.80 (.421)	2.80 (.410)	1.000
Faculty governance is necessary for a sense of fairness.	2.30 (.823)	2.90 (.316)	2.60 (.680)	.0453*
Faculty governance has a tradition in curricular issues.	2.80 (.421)	3.00 (.000)	2.90 (.307)	.1510
Faculty involvement in governance is essential in curriculum development.	2.70 (.483)	2.80 (.421)	2.75 (.444)	.6278

(table continues)

Table 1, continued

## Provost's Perspective on the Value of Faculty Involvement in Governance

Perspective	Liberal Arts Mean (SD)	Research Mean (SD)	Overall Mean (SD)	<i>f</i> prob
Being the core of the university setting, faculty governance is central to broader institutional decision-making.	2.60 (.699)	2.90 (.316)	2.75 (.550)	.2323
Faculty governance is most effective in the area of academic program development.	2.80 (.421)	2.80 (.632)	2.80 (.523)	1.000
Faculty focus should be on teaching, scholarship, and advising.	3.00 (.000)	2.30 (.674)	2.65 (.587)	.0042*
Faculty should be consulted during decision-making processes to add perspective.	2.70 (.483)	2.60 (.516)	2.65 (.489)	.6601
Good faculty involvement actually spreads the workload around and allows more work to get done.	3.00 (.000)	2.80 (.421)	2.90 (.307)	.1510
Faculty governance is more essential now than ever.	3.00 (.000)	2.30 (.674)	2.65 (.587)	.0042
We need to work with faculty on a common set of values.	2.70 (.483)	2.60 (.516)	2.65 (.489)	.6601
Faculty governance is valuable because it offers an opportunity to make an investment in the institution.	2.80 (.632)	2.60 (.516)	2.70 (.571)	.4486

(table continues)

Table 1, continued

## Provost's Perspective on the Value of Faculty Involvement in Governance

Perspective	Liberal Arts Mean (SD)	Research Mean (SD)	Overall Mean (SD)	<i>f prob</i>
Faculty involvement in governance increases the level of awareness among faculty.	2.60 (.699)	2.70 (.483)	2.65 (.587)	.7142
Faculty involvement in governance increases understanding of university strengths and weaknesses.	3.00 (.000)	2.90 (.316)	2.95 (.223)	.3306
Faculty involvement in governance strengthens democratic principles at work.	3.00 (.000)	3.00 (.000)	3.00 (.000)	.

\*significant at the .05 level.



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