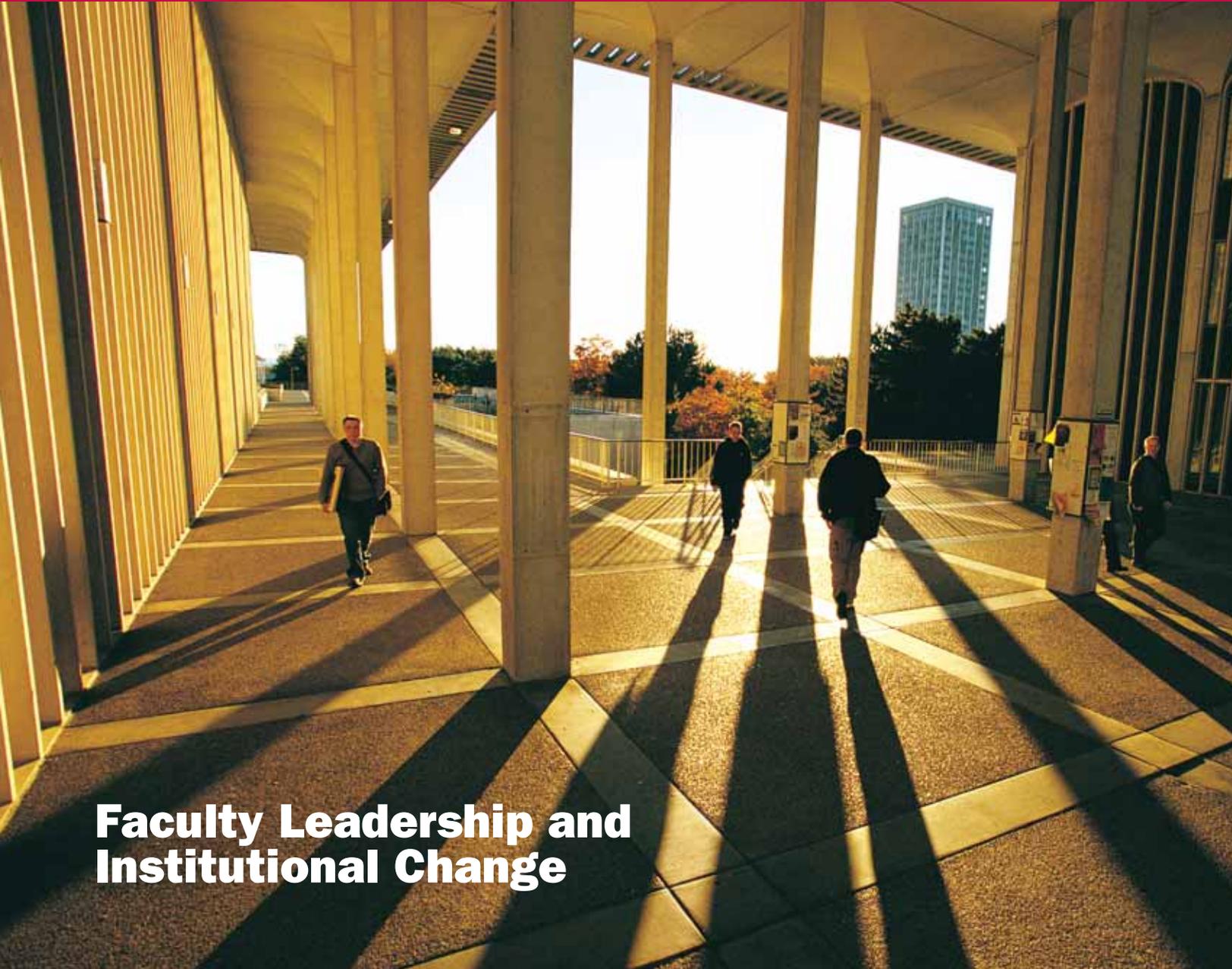


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JERRY G. GAFF

What If the Faculty Really Do Assume Responsibility for the Educational Program?

THE GOVERNANCE of most colleges and universities is shared among the board of trustees, the administration, and the faculty. Most four-year institutions endorse the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities (1966), which asserts that the faculty has *primary* authority over the academic area, including such matters as the curriculum, standards of faculty competence, and standards of student achievement. In this area, the governing board and administration should “concur with the faculty judgment except in rare instances and for compelling reasons which should be stated in detail.” The board and administration, the statement says, should have primary authority over mission, strategic direction, physical plant, and fiscal resources. In these areas, the faculty has *secondary* authority and should be consulted and informed about major decisions.

Oddly, the AAUP statement is largely silent about faculty responsibility for *programs of study* and the *learning of students*. Faculty members are hired to implement programs of study, not just to conduct their own research or to teach their own courses, and such programs are intended to lead to student learning. Both of these factors change the dynamics of shared governance in ways that were not envisioned during the early and mid-twentieth century, when basic governance agreements were devised.

With regard to the area over which faculty have primary authority, the educational program, there are two problems that need urgently to be addressed. The first concerns the apparent disconnect between authority and accountability. It is generally agreed that the faculty, those with expert authority, should be the ones to make academic decisions rather than administrators or trustees, who have *bureaucratic* authority. Yet while the faculty are generally *responsible* for academic decisions, they are seldom held *accountable* either for student learning or for the fiscal results of their decisions. And while administrators are held *accountable* for student learning by accrediting agencies, they have *no legitimate authority* to intervene in the academic programs that are designed to produce student learning; while they are *responsible* for financial prudence, they again have little *authority* to “meddle” in the curriculum or to alter academic decisions made by the faculty.

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The reality is that faculty members and academic administrators share responsibility—and authority—for the educational program



However defined, a program of study is necessarily a corporate responsibility. It is designed and approved by the governance system of an institution and/or by one of its units. By definition, the educational program imposes expectations on faculty members; each individual has the responsibility to contribute to the success of the program as a whole, regardless of his or her own personal or professional preferences. Although faculty members absolutely need freedom and autonomy, their autonomy is not absolute. It is constrained, minimally, by their obligation to contribute to the educational program(s) for which they are hired (or as they have evolved).

The current paradigm shift “from teaching to learning” (Barr and Tagg 1995; Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward 2006) signifies a new emphasis on student learning. Indeed, accrediting agencies now require evidence of student learning as a condition for accreditation. This shift has necessitated a change in focus from the faculty member and his or her teaching to the students and their learning. For today’s faculty, responsibility for oversight of the instructional program also increasingly includes responsibility for planning educational activities in such a way that students actually learn the material, achieve at the expected level, and document that achievement through assessment. Collectively, faculty need to be more purposeful in designing and implementing programs of study to achieve high levels of student learning.

The second problem concerns the tendency of faculty and administrators to invent faculty governance over a wide array of programs on an *ad hoc* basis. Over the years, hundreds of campuses have worked through projects of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to identify educational problems and devise strategies for making improvements. These projects have covered a wide variety of topics, including general education, academic majors and preprofessional programs, interdisciplinary studies, and special initiatives involving diversity, global studies, and student transfer practices. Typically, an institution assembles a task group or committee consisting of faculty members from various disciplines and an academic administrator; occasionally, students and student affairs staff members are also included. This

group is then charged by the institution to review an area of study and to recommend improvements.

When they work on institutional initiatives that span departments, such groups routinely discover that nobody is in charge of important educational programs. They realize that they must invent structures, design processes, and create leadership positions that allow the faculty as a whole to be more attentive to important educational agendas. Over and over, we at AAC&U have watched faculty groups struggle to invent specific governance arrangements for particular areas of study on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, groups may not only recommend a more rigorous general education program but also create a leadership position, such as dean or director of general education, to direct the program with the advice of a newly created campus-wide committee. Other leadership positions may also be included for specific components of the curriculum, such as a director of a first-year program or an associate dean for diversity.

Recommendations for strengthening faculty governance

Traditional governance arrangements assume a “one-size-fits-all” stance that has been regarded as appropriate for research universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges and for large and small institutions alike. Yet institutions differ in terms of their missions, instructional programs, student bodies, and relative emphases on research, teaching, and service. Accordingly, an institution should design programs of instruction, and appropriate structures to support them, in ways that are in keeping with its individual mission, heritage, and culture.

In order to advance thinking about how the faculty can provide more effective oversight for the educational program and improve student learning, I offer below five recommendations for strengthening faculty governance, which institutions can modify in light of their particular missions and circumstances.

1. Link departments with institutional issues.

One of the primary ways the faculty has been organized to conduct its oversight of the academic program is through departments and schools. In many respects, this organization does ensure that academic programs are sound, that professors in the disciplines are

qualified, and that students meet accepted standards. Moreover, departments and other units have been created to advance research and to organize the education of students in their fields, and by and large they have succeeded in these tasks.

Departments were created when the map of knowledge was far simpler, however. With the dynamic growth of new knowledge, the subdivision of old disciplines, and the combinations of formerly disparate areas to create new specializations—and with faculty networked with colleagues in other disciplines and even across continents—the contemporary academy is not well served by the persistent reification of disciplines into fixed organizational units (Klein 1998).

Even the best departments too often function like silos; members attend to their own interests without consideration of other departments or institutional priorities. Of course, departments should support education and scholarship in their respective disciplines. But departments are units of an institution, and they should be expected to advance institution-wide educational programs that advance institutional priorities. In theory, chairs are aware of institutional issues and initiatives, and they link departments with institutional matters. But in reality, chairs are often selected to advance departmental interests and to protect faculty members from institutional intrusions. Chairs often lack managerial expertise or skill in communicating between their faculty colleagues and administrators. Departments need to function more like a matrix in which departmental planning and operations are linked with institutional agendas. Even when chairs are disinterested or incapable, other faculty members would welcome the opportunity to link their departments with institutional discussions and initiatives concerning, for example, general education, diversity, the use of instructional technology, or the assessment of student learning.

There have been too few efforts among administrators to bring faculty members into the national dialogue about improving the quality of education; to inform them of innovations that promote more active, collaborative, and experiential approaches to teaching and learning; and to define institutional priorities

While the faculty are generally responsible for academic decisions, they are seldom held accountable

about such matters. Many faculty members see their roles and rewards only through disciplinary lenses. As a vision for the academic profession, that is not wrong; but it is

insufficient. Many faculty members do not recognize opportunities to couple their specialized expertise to larger interests that can expand their own horizons, engage students, and advance their institutions.

Modern management processes keep structures from hardening and promote new strategies to increase effectiveness and productivity. For example, corporations are creating new businesses that are more focused and nimbler—forging closer partnerships with suppliers and customers, devising faster means of communicating with clients, utilizing the Internet to make purchasing faster and cheaper, and employing just-in-time inventory. By comparison, the structure and culture of the academic department is inflexible and badly out of date. This is not to endorse the often wrong-headed call by trustees to apply business practices in the academy; it is, instead, merely a suggestion for how departments could become more vital and contemporary in supporting both students and faculty.

2. Provide academic leadership for important programs that transcend departments. Many important educational goals can only be achieved across departments. Critical thinking, say, or quantitative reasoning is not developed in a single course; both are practiced, refined, and perfected in multiple courses and contexts. “Writing across the curriculum” programs, for example, are based on the simple idea that writing skills can be strengthened if practiced repeatedly in different courses and disciplines.

Institutions with writing across the curriculum programs have learned that they need to appoint a director of writing to achieve their purposes. The director performs several tasks: he or she recruits faculty from all sectors of the institution to design courses that include writing; provides training to faculty in giving assignments and providing useful feedback to students; approves courses that meet the spirit of the program; advises students about the reasons for “writing-intensive” courses; serves as a spokesperson for the writing program; assesses the program; hears appeals from students;

and prepares reports on the progress of the program. Without the leadership enabled by the director of writing position, a writing across the curriculum program cannot achieve its full potential.

Similarly, institutions are creating a variety of first-year, civic engagement, and interdisciplinary studies programs. Each requires academic leadership that goes beyond the usual college dean or department chair. Some recently created leadership positions that help faculty assume responsibility for important programs include director of general education, dean of experiential learning, director of service learning, coordinator of undergraduate research, vice chancellor for student success, associate dean for diversity, and director of academic assessment. Although these new positions are created to “administer” important programs, the individuals appointed to them are typically faculty members who enjoy widespread respect for their academic leadership in these areas. These new leaders are passionate about the educational agendas they oversee, and their positions allow them to work with their faculty colleagues and their students to advance important educational purposes.

As Donald Farmer, the late vice president for academic affairs, has said of King’s College, “we are well organized vertically. But all of our new strategic educational initiatives are horizontal. We are not organized to address them” (pers. comm.). The creation of new leadership positions that span academic departments and schools is a good place to start.

3. Streamline the committee system.

Committees are commonly established to support faculty supervision of the instructional program. Faculty exercise their collective responsibilities through, for example, committees for the curriculum, academic standards, and personnel. The committee structure is a classical bureaucratic way to differentiate a task into its various parts, providing for both specialization of function and division of labor.

In practice, however, the committee system does not work well. Many faculty committees are organized around matters that are not very important; faculty who serve often do not see that their contribution makes much difference; members are recruited who have little interest or expertise in the area of committee responsibility; discussions that have been worked through to a decision often are rehashed or

overruled by the faculty as a whole; some chairs are not effective in running meetings; and the list goes on. Faculty themselves are not satisfied with the operation of the committee system. In a survey of private liberal arts colleges, which a prior national survey found to be the institutions where faculty are most satisfied with academic governance, Berberet (1999) reports that 60 percent of the faculty say they are required to spend too much time on committee work.

The most serious limitations of the committee system are typical of bureaucratic structures in general. Faculty committees are focused on some particular aspect of the instructional program, but often there is no formal relationship among different committees. For example, the curriculum and faculty personnel committees usually work independently, although the work of each has significance for the work of the other. The university curriculum committee at an institution involved in a recent AAC&U project was developing a plan to staff a newly approved general education program, while the personnel committee was simultaneously devising a plan to reduce the faculty workload by one course per year. The resulting workload reduction presented a serious challenge to the implementation of the newly approved curriculum.

Often, the decisions of different faculty committees are linked only by an academic administrator who works with each, which, curiously, makes the coordination of faculty decision making the responsibility of the administration. This might be fine, but it should be the result of an explicit agreement about coordinating faculty work, rather than an accident. Even a meeting of the key committee chairs once per term, perhaps in concert with the provost or dean, to share anticipated agendas in each area and to make arrangements for sharing progress among the chairs of other committees and departments would constitute a major improvement on many campuses.

Further, while some committee is attending to each specific area, the educational program as a whole often has no single committee charged to look after it. In the words of the seminal report *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (Association of American Colleges 1985, 9), it is important to “revive the responsibility of the faculty *as a whole* for the curriculum *as a*

whole.” Unlike even the smallest department, the general education program—the largest academic program in most institutions—usually has no chair, no faculty, and no budget. For this reason, many of the institutions that have revised their general education programs to be more purposeful and coherent have created an administrative position so that someone, typically a faculty leader respected for his or her work in general education and passionate about its value, can provide academic leadership for the program. For the same reason, many institutions also create a general education committee of faculty members (and sometimes students) to advise the general administrator about the core curriculum.

4. Develop constructive working relationships with administrators. It is an intellectual mistake to hold that faculty do not need the support of administrators in order really to have authority and responsibility for the instructional program. Virtually all of the decisions made by faculty have to be approved by administrators, and often trustees as well, before they can become institutional policy. Faculty exercise more effective control over the instructional program when they cultivate good relationships with various kinds of administrators who can assist them in realizing their goals.

Academic administrators are hired to provide leadership and oversight of the academic

Even the best departments too often function like silos

program, promote the professional development of the faculty, and ensure the achievement of students. Thus, we have a curious circumstance in which *both* the faculty *and* academic administrators are responsible for the academic program. Yet, the AAUP Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities provides no guidance about how to navigate this state of affairs.

The reality is that faculty members and academic administrators share responsibility—and authority—for the educational program. They need to utilize both the subject matter content knowledge of the faculty and the institution-wide perspective, institutional knowledge, and resources of the provost, vice president for academic affairs, or dean. Faculty members and academic administrators work best when they have trust and respect for one another and when they collaborate for the benefit of students.

It is a truism that much student learning occurs outside the classroom, and institutions have large staffs to promote learning in residence halls as well as through internships, community service, study abroad, etc. These professionals are committed to students and their learning. By working collaboratively with student affairs staff, faculty can extend their educational reach beyond the classroom. Today, both faculty members and student affairs professionals are refocusing their work on student learning.



University of Albany

By and large, finance officers assume a hands-off stance toward the instructional program. This practice contributes to the fiction that the faculty is “in control” of the academic program, but how much control would the faculty have without money? The fact of the matter is that most faculty members, even experienced faculty leaders, have little knowledge about the basic financial realities of their institutions and instructional programs. This may be because the administration does not share pertinent information about finances with the faculty, or because faculty regard finance as outside their responsibilities. Nonetheless, the faculty cannot have much real control without knowledge of the cost of various curricula, reliable information about the financial condition of the institution, and access to financial modeling for alternatives to common instructional practices. Rather than accepting isolation from the finance office, faculty would be better served by working jointly with the best available financial minds to develop policies, programs, and budgets that are both educationally and fiscally sound.

A few years ago, AAC&U worked with the National Association of College and University Business Officers to address the need to both improve quality and control costs in undergraduate education. This initiative brought chief academic officers and faculty leaders into dialogue with chief financial officers in order to develop more collaborative relationships and to generate specific ideas for addressing these twin agendas. Faculty members and academic administrators reported that it was an eye-opening experience for them to examine the financial implications of instructional practices and learn about the educational benefits that can be created by thoughtful reallocations of resources. To the pleasant surprise of faculty, financial officers are interested in supporting educational quality.

Ferren and Slavings (2000) have developed economic models to show the financial benefits of several initiatives designed to improve the quality of education by reducing attrition rates through a first-year seminar, providing supplemental instruction to help “at-risk” students succeed, and supporting students’ success

Faculty members are employed to do their intellectual work within the context of particular institutions, which both permit education and constrain it

in courses with high failure rates, as well as through better curriculum management and steps to enhance institutional productivity. They demonstrate the compatibility of improving quality and gaining efficiency. If faculty and finance officers investigate the actual costs of various curricular or instruc-

tional practices and are willing to consider alternatives, they may be able to reallocate dollars to invest in quality.

5. Name the work faculty do, recognize and reward it. The work faculty do in assuming responsibility for significant portions of the educational program and for leading educational innovations lacks a name that has academic currency. Among other activities, institutions of all types are working to devise new frameworks for general education, developing first-year programs, creating learning communities, conducting assessments of student learning, and incorporating diversity into courses and programs. But the important work faculty do to launch these initiatives is often not recognized. “In the midst of [a] campus visit,” Carol Schneider observes, “it dawned on me that the ‘work’ these campuses want faculty to perform for such initiatives *has no name.*”

She continues by explaining her observation:

It is not teaching, even though the initiatives focus on learning. It is not scholarship, even in the expanded meanings of scholarship that the late Ernest Boyer and Eugene Rice have helpfully provided (i.e., the scholarships of discovery, integration, application, and teaching). The desired activity also is not service, as that ambiguously defined tail of the academic dog is currently understood. But it is demanding intellectual work, and it is not something that faculty members can accomplish satisfactorily in a few extra hours of committee time. (1998, 1)

Schneider suggests the term “stewardship” to describe this special kind of faculty leadership that is desperately needed but seldom recognized. If the faculty are actually to provide stewardship for the instructional program, they need to conceptualize this kind of work, and they also need to honor and support their colleagues who labor to provide this form of academic leadership.

Richard Miller (1998) argues that the assumed distinction between intellectual and bureaucratic labor complicates the task of the faculty member who wants to be an effective teacher or researcher or to make improvements in educational programs. The reality is that faculty members are employed to do their intellectual work within the context of particular institutions, which both permit education and constrain it. In cases where a faculty member cannot escape the constraints of the institution, Miller advocates becoming sophisticated in the ways of organizations so that the faculty member can navigate and negotiate support for his or her research, teaching, and students. Miller concludes that “the best strategy available to anyone preparing to enter the profession may well involve fabricating for oneself and for the academic community at large some inhabitable version of *the intellectual bureaucrat*” (1998, 216, italics added). Although Miller acknowledges that this is an inelegant phrase, it does capture the idea that in order to be an effective teacher, researcher, or advocate for quality education or for one’s students, the best avenue is not to reject institutional entanglements but to become expert in them—to become, in other words, engaged and effective academic citizens.

Conclusion

The evidence is widespread that the governance of colleges and universities is in need of reform. Jack Schuster and Martin Finkelstein (2006, 358) declare that “almost no one is pleased with the way campuses are governed: not faculty, not administrators, not governing boards, not external observers.” This observation is supported by Tierney (2001); Scott (1997); Kezar, Lester, and Anderson (2006); McMillan and Berberet (2002); and Mortimer and Sathre (2007).

Faculty members, administrators, and trustees have an opportunity to reinforce traditional academic and educational values by revising the traditional structures and processes that once supported those values, but that now interfere with them. The recommendations offered above can give faculty even greater control of the instructional program through mutual and collaborative relations with other authorities. As McMillan and Berberet (2002, 5), calling for a “new academic compact,” put it, “at its core this compact serves mission best

. . . when institution and faculty alike nurture the effectiveness of the other.” The benefits to faculty and administrations, as well as to students, promise to exceed their risk and effort. □

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