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Faculty Senate: Models, Myths, and Minutia

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This paper reviews the research literature about the structure, roles, and models of faculty senate including roles of faculty senate in academic and non-academic issues, the difference in faculty voice and influence in shared governance, and identified models of faculty senate purpose. The authors of this concept paper propose a three-step strategic process for faculty to analyze the current profile of their respective faculty senates, determine the desired state of their senates, and develop a plan for transition. Larger issues such as what does effectiveness mean are beyond the scope of this paper. This paper focuses on what are the goals of the university and the role of faculty in meeting those goals.

Involving faculty in university governance is important for institutional effectiveness (Burgan, 1998; Gerber et al., 1997; Miller, 2003). However, other research questions the role that faculty play in university leadership (Gerber, 1991). Despite the disagreement, faculty involvement in shared governance is required by accreditation bodies (Higher Learning Commission, 2012).

For more than 90% of four-year universities and colleges, faculty senate (or a similar organization) is the most common vehicle used in post-secondary higher education to involve faculty in shared governance and provide faculty a voice in university and college leadership and decision making (Gilmour, 1991; Minor, 2003). Aside from Minor’s research (2003, 2004), the absence of research literature regarding faculty senate indicates the serious need for additional research regarding the role of faculty senate and its ability to meet the needs/wants of faculty and strengthen its influence on campuses.

Kellogg (2001) assigned responsibility for an effective faculty senate on faculty. He noted two key concepts: first, the importance and mandatory existence of some vehicle for faculty voice, even if faculty feel the voice is not valued, and second, the responsibility of faculty senate to determine how to restructure and regroup to strengthen their voice and influence.

Step 1: Current analysis

Strategic planning begins with identifying the current situation or profile. Understanding the purpose, structure, and reach of faculty senates in governance provides a framework upon which faculty can improve (if desired) the reach and extent of both their voice and influence in university decision making. Consensus is required among faculty regarding the current state of their senate before proceeding discussing the desired state and the plan to get there, including resources. Minor (2003) developed four models to describe types of faculty senate: Traditional, influential, dormant, and cultural. He stressed that no one model is necessarily superior to another, noting that faculty senates can shift from one model to another. Even so, determining the current model for a faculty senate can help provide insight about the existing function, issues, and power of the organization.

According to Minor (2003), traditional faculty senates function to preserve and represent the interest of the faculty in the decision making process. They manage academic issues and have a voice in non-academic issues.
Influential faculty senates are similar to traditional models but are more powerful and assertive, proactively managing academic issues and influencing non-academic issues. They are seen as a “legitimate integrated governance body of the campus with the ability to create change” (Minor, 2003).

Dormant faculty senates are inactive with minimal function, deferring academic and non-academic issues to the school or college level. Dormant faculty senates are not a power in university decision making so faculty members may find alternative means for participating in governance (Minor, 2003).

The last model for faculty senates is cultural and their function continually changes depending on a variety of fluid dynamics including personnel. The issues of the university tend to define the role more than does the structure of the senate (Minor).

The next issue that faculty may address in analyzing the current situation of their faculty senate is the level of shared governance that the faculty senate has. The levels of shared governance examine the various stages of voice and decision making abilities on both academic and non-academic issues.

Minor (2003) noted, much of the body of knowledge in the research literature about faculty senates is framed within the context of shared governance.

Step 2: Desired state

Is there incongruence between the current model and the desired model among faculty? Does incongruence between models exist among university administrators?

In 2003, Minor documented that faculty nationwide were “dissatisfied with the quality of their involvement in decision making” (para. 1). He wrote that “faculty senates are considered the wildcard in academic governance; they are varied, unpredictable, and can alter outcomes depending on the situation. The extent to which they become better understood and more effectively involved in governance will enable better decision making in universities” (Minor, 2003, para. 2).

Indeed, the research literature documents several cases of friction between faculty and administrators wherein both groups have tried unsuccessfully dissolve faculty senates (AAUP, 2012; Kellogg, 2001).

Step 3: Transition

If faculty want their senate to be more effective in decision outcomes as well as decision making, then faculty must proactively define the role of faculty senate and structure it for success. All of this presumes that, in fact, power exists de facto, not de jure. This leaves the challenge to faculty to determine how they will, in fact, earn credibility, influence, value, and power in governance.

Regardless of what models used to be or exist now, part of the concept of this strategic plan is to determine what faculty and administrators want – which requires agreement on the function, role, power, and authority of the faculty senate.
References


