Speakers See Threats to the Concept of Shared Governance

By David Glenn

Washington

The concept of shared governance is in serious jeopardy at American colleges and universities, four scholars said Friday during a panel discussion here at the annual meeting of the American Association of University Professors.

That might sound like a dog-bites-man story; the AAUP's central reason for being, of course, is to defend faculty rights against encroachments from administrators and trustees. But the speakers on Friday's panel were not necessarily admirers of the AAUP's positions on academic governance. In fact, at least one of them seemed to be trying to get under the skin of the faculty activists in the room.

The panel was organized by the right-of-center American Council of Trustees and Alumni, an organization that rarely sees eye to eye with the AAUP (though the two organizations have collaborated recently on efforts to oppose speech codes on college campuses).

One central problem with shared academic governance, the panelists said, is that few people agree about exactly what the concept means. In 1966 the AAUP, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges produced a joint statement on tripartite governance, but Friday's speakers argued that the concept has not been put into practice in consistent ways in the last 44 years.

"When I was in government, I saw that when competing groups had trouble reaching compromise, they would sometimes write legislation with vague words that allowed each side to claim victory," said Hank Brown, a former U.S. senator who served as president of the University of Colorado from 2005 to 2008. "That's
what I'm afraid has happened with this term 'shared governance.' It means different things to different people, and those different understandings give rise to frustration."

Faculty vs. Board
Michael B. Poliakoff, the council's policy director, said faculty members "tend to see trustees as bottom-line-oriented micromanagers, and trustees see the faculty as obstinately resistant to change. The result is a sad and unnecessary stalemate. We need to work collaboratively and constructively to address questions of cost and quality."

A decade from now, for better or worse, trustees will generally have much more control over academic programs than they do today, said Donald L. Drakeman, who is a visiting lecturer in politics at Princeton University and a member of Drew University's Board of Trustees.

"Many factors outside of anyone's control will drive that change," Mr. Drakeman said. Among other things, he cited state laws that are giving college trustees stronger fiduciary responsibilities, the shorter terms that most college presidents are serving, and the decline in the proportion of faculty members who are tenured.

"I'm not advocating this change, and I'm not opposing it," Mr. Drakeman said. "I'm just saying that it's going to happen."

Mr. Drakeman said that he feared that programs in the humanities and social sciences would suffer as trustees throw resources toward career-oriented academic programs in business and medicine. But he said that if faculty members want to preserve humanities programs, they should make sure the programs are not politically monochromatic.

If humanities programs seem to be purely left-wing, Mr. Drakeman said, "trustees will legitimately wonder whether students are being exposed to the full range of arguments about human flourishing."

Mr. Drakeman has helped to finance a high-profile effort to promote conservative scholarship on an Ivy League campus, the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton, and he is chairman of its board of advisers.

'No Use' for Tenure
The panel's most combative speaker was Mark S. Schneider, a
former commissioner of the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics who taught political science at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Mr. Schneider, who is now a vice president at the American Institutes for Research, said that emerging technologies will make many present-day faculty roles obsolete. An example of such technologies that he cited are online courses like those developed by Carnegie Mellon University's Open Learning Initiative.

The medieval system in which all students were mentored by individual scholars cannot survive, Mr. Schneider said. "Higher education has worked on a craft model for hundreds of years," he said. "But when handicrafts meet mass production, handicrafts almost always lose."

Administrators, trustees, and state legislators have been too deferential to faculty members' wishes, Mr. Schneider argued. At major research universities, too many senior faculty members are released from teaching courses and yet do not actually publish much research, he said. And such universities often do a bad job of nurturing and monitoring their faculty members' effectiveness in the classroom, he added.

"When I taught political science at Stony Brook," he said, "I was a content expert. But did I know anything about testing? About instruction? Zero. And yet when I walked into a classroom with 15 students, essentially everything the taxpayers of New York had invested in that class was in me."

And in a final toast to his audience, Mr. Schneider said, "I want you to know that I have no use for the concept of tenure. None whatsoever."

After all of those provocations, the question-and-answer period was civil. But most members of the audience were clearly unpersuaded by many of the arguments they had heard. The erosion of tenure and the decline in the proportion of tenure-track faculty are central to any understanding of struggles over academic governance, several people said. Two audience members pointed to spiraling administrative costs as the real reason for declines in the effectiveness of colleges' instruction.

But several people in the room also thanked the panelists for
opening up the conversation. "There are enough problems here that we can place blame on every single stakeholder in education," said Annette E. Craven, an associate professor of management at the University of the Incarnate Word.