

The Pulse of Shared Governance at DU: An Unvarnished Personal Account

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It's my opinion that the patient is not entirely well, and that faculty and administration have an obligation to work together to restore it to good health. Two governance experiences in which I was closely involved in the last couple of years convince me of this.

1. Debating Curricular Reform

Establishing general education requirements is, in a shared governance world, the collective responsibility of faculty. While we might delegate an elected and/or appointed committee to spearhead the process, at the end of the day it is the faculty as a *community of expertise* that bears responsibility for how we generally educate our students. In this matter *all* faculty should have an equal voice, and be heard.

I don't believe that these fundamental principles of faculty governance were observed in our most recent round of general education review. Accepting the General Education Review Committee's (GERC) invitation to provide input about what a new general education curriculum should look like, I sent several suggestions to GERC through my elected Faculty Senate and Social Sciences representatives. After GERC released a proposal that I did not think served the best interests of our students I wrote a "Counterproposal for General Education Reform", copying it to GERC first. The counterproposal was grounded in a paradigm of liberal education, informed by comparative research, and spiced with assessment data. Although framed with provocative language, the document was not intended to compete with the official proposal. Rather, it was intended to stimulate wider faculty discussion about alternative approaches to generally educating our students. I'll also confess that, as a former Faculty Senate President, I was interested in testing our processes of shared governance. I vetted the counterproposal with a respected academic administrator who encouraged me to go forward with it. I was egged on by sympathetic colleagues. I presented the counterproposal to the Faculty Senate Executive Committee which authorized its distribution to the academic units through their elected Senators. I wrote a column for the *Faculty Forum* weblog justifying my dissent. I gave a presentation at a Faculty Senate meeting to what I now remember as a not-entirely-friendly audience.

I have no idea how much discussion the counterproposal stimulated. I'm guessing not a lot, but that's OK. Much more disturbing was the news—shared with me by colleagues in a position to know—that the counterproposal was seen by some as illegitimate, as publicly undermining the work of GERC, and as violating faculty governance and process. I also learned that discussion in some units was actively discouraged for fear

of legitimizing that which was considered illegitimate. Clearly, the document was not received in the spirit in which it was intended. All of this was astonishing to me. Floating a counterproposal might have been an audacious act, but it certainly wasn't an inappropriate one if we accept that *all* faculty have status as co-owners of the curriculum. GERC didn't respond to the document, not even to say that "these ideas suck in principle and won't work in practice." Such a reaction, from a shared governance perspective, would have been much better than silence. When the time arrived for a faculty vote on the GERC proposal I emailed Faculty Senate colleagues to thank them for their indulgence and to express concern about what appeared to be active suppression of dialogue about a curricular matter for which faculty have collective responsibility. There was another deafening silence and not a peep was heard from the Senate's Academic Planning Committee. This struck me as very odd because the Senate's Constitution explicitly empowers faculty to "formulate, debate, and adopt policy recommendations regarding any aspect of the life of the university and to communicate these recommendations to the administration."

This was not a shining example of shared governance as it relates to the faculty's obligations *to each other*. If we're not here to address and vigorously debate alternative ideas about curriculum and pedagogy—no matter what their source or form—then we're not only failing in our commitment to shared governance but we're also failing in our responsibility as educators.

2. Collaborating to Make Policy

When I became Faculty Senate president in 2006 I inherited from my two immediate predecessors the challenge of clarifying the university's Faculty Grievance Policy. What currently passes for a policy is largely contained within that section of the Faculty Senate Constitution that describes the function of the Faculty Review Committee (i.e., section VI.A.1). Other pieces relevant to the policy are in our APT document and in the university's Employee Handbook. We thought that having a single document would be of great benefit to faculty having workplace issues of the kind that a formal Faculty Grievance Policy addresses at many other institutions.

In summer 2007 the campus AAUP chapter set about drafting a formal policy that would bring the pieces together and add important details about process. We produced several early drafts of a policy. In September 2007 draft #5 was submitted to the Senate Personnel Committee. Draft #6 was vetted by Human Resources (HR). In February 2008 draft #7 was reviewed by the Deans Council and draft #8 made several significant revisions to the policy based on decanal input. Specifically, we eliminated an illustrative list of grievable issues, stipulated a mandatory first step of informal resolution, and recommended that deans have a seat on the Faculty Review Committee should one of their peers be named as a respondent in a grievance proceeding. We also agreed to exclude from the grievance process disputes over salary. This was a major concession: even though salary inequity is identified as a grievable issue under the Senate Constitution we had assurances that such disputes could be effectively handled through HR's general employee grievance process.

We submitted draft #8 to the AAUP chapter and Faculty Senate for more discussion, and we received additional input from members of the standing Faculty Review Committee. In May 2009 (around about draft #11, and just as a third Senate presidency was expiring without producing an approved policy) the Provost convened a joint Deans-Faculty committee to achieve closure. However, our process broke down at draft #13 (perhaps an omen?) when it became clear that we were heading in a direction that threatened to eliminate a number of other grievable issues currently covered by the Senate Constitution. Not only was the policy's scope being narrowed, but approval of a Faculty Grievance Policy was becoming contingent on approval of an *administrator* grievance policy aimed at faculty who were perceived as not meeting their teaching and research obligations. This struck us as somewhat odd given the significant power that deans already have to protect their rights and interests. At death's door but still willing to press forward using existing Senate Constitution provisions and AAUP recommendations as a baseline, in early September 2009 we asked our decanal colleagues if they saw any point in continuing. I believe it's accurate to describe the decanal response as constituting a "No", but some of my joint Deans-Faculty committee colleagues disagree.

This was not a shining example of shared governance as a negotiated strategy for adjudicating power in a way that respects the rights and interests of *different* constituencies. We do small-scale shared governance as well as most universities. But both of these larger-scale governance processes—each important to the health and vitality of the institution—could have gone better. Faculty and administrators must share the blame, and we need to work much better together to get things right. Other contributors to this issue of the *Faculty Forum* identify some ways of doing just that.