News

How RPI's Faculty Voice Was Quieted

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When the Faculty Senate at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute voted, in spring 2006, to widen its membership to include contingent faculty, it set in motion a series of events that left the senate in a state of limbo and shredded the notion of shared governance, according to a report released Wednesday by the American Association of University Professors, which was based on an investigation by the national group.

The broad outlines of the controversy have been reported widely in recent years, including a piece, titled "The Demise of Shared Governance at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute," in the Journal of Academic Freedom, by the RPI professors Nancy Campbell and Jane F. Koretz. They warned that what happened to shared governance at RPI represented, potentially, "an early casualty of larger structural changes in higher education," as the institute became more centralized and corporate.

Still, some details remain in dispute. RPI's official response, which is included in the report, says the institute would decline specific comment because it never recognized the role of the AAUP in what it sees as an internal matter. At the same time, RPI's response mentions "several factual errors, many relevant omissions, and much speculative comment, which may easily have influenced the erroneous conclusions reached," without naming them. On Tuesday, the institute declined a request to comment for this article.

The AAUP report by the investigating committee -- Mary A. Burgan, former general secretary of the AAUP; Adrianna Kezar, associate professor of higher education at the University of Southern California; Mary C. Potter, professor of psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Duane Storti, associate professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Washington -- was based on interviews with 22 faculty members (including some who were sympathetic to the administration's views), which were carried out during a two-day visit to a site off campus. RPI administrators told the investigators that they were not welcome and that campus officials would not cooperate, according to the report.

The report carries no formal weight beyond efforts at moral suasion and public shaming. Such documents typically result, eventually, in a listing as a sanctioned institution on the AAUP's website. Still, the report is the first to put the events that unfolded in Troy, N.Y., over the past half-decade in the context of commonly accepted practices that are meant to involve faculty in joint decision-making on matters that are important to institutions.

Those events include the administration's decisions to overrule a vote of the senate, unilaterally suspend that body, and replace it with an interim form of faculty governance, all of which "contravened basic principles of shared academic governance," the investigators wrote. They characterized the closing of the senate as more than "an abrogation of the board-approved senate constitution," which had been in operation since 1993. "It was also an attack on precedent, established procedures, and other requisites for effective shared governance."

As recounted in the report and, previously, in Inside Higher Ed, the background tensions began in the years following the naming of a new president, Shirley Ann Jackson. While her appointment was initially cheered on campus, criticisms began to emerge that she favored new professors over more senior ones; let the engineering programs slip into decline; brooked no criticism; and partook of too many perks in office. In April 2006, she narrowly escaped a vote of no confidence.

That same month, the Faculty Senate voted to include what RPI calls "clinical faculty" -- full-time, teaching-intensive positions that are not eligible for tenure -- in the senate's membership. The move to bring clinical faculty into the senate was seen as a way to remedy what was initially a minor oversight but had turned, inadvertently, into large-scale disenfranchisement. When the senate's constitution was ratified in 1993, RPI had just three or four clinical faculty members. In subsequent years, as research was more vigorously promoted, the job of teaching fell to increasing numbers of clinical faculty. The authors estimate that, at the time of the suspension of the senate, 94 faculty members, or nearly one-fifth the total at RPI's main and satellite campuses, fell into the "clinical" category.
The decision was conveyed to the provost at the time, who reportedly supported the change, according to the report. His replacement, Robert Palazzo, did not agree, saying in a November 2006 memorandum that only tenured and tenure-track faculty members -- who are subject to higher levels of review and scrutiny before hiring -- can be fully vested in the life and guidance of the institute, the report says. The dispute also exposed a more fundamental disagreement: who had the power to change the constitution of the Faculty Senate? As faculty members saw it, changes were to be initiated and voted on by them before being forwarded to the provost, president, and Board of Trustees for approval. The trustees saw themselves as having the power to direct the senate to change its constitution.

The conflict escalated. By the end of that year, the Board of Trustees ordered the Faculty Senate to overturn its vote and amend its constitution to enshrine tenured and tenure-track faculty as the only voters -- stripping senate membership not just from clinical faculty but also from research faculty, librarians, archivists, and retired and emeritus faculty.

For several months, the senate tried and failed to hash out a response. In September 2007, the administration suspended the Faculty Senate because it had failed to “comply with the board’s directive to modify its constitution consistent with the board’s definition of the faculty,” the investigators wrote, citing a post by the administration on RPI’s website. Multiple efforts to broker a compromise ended in failure.

The AAUP investigators examined three central questions. The first was whether the administration had a legitimate basis to suspend the senate (it didn't, in their opinion). The second was whether the conditions needed for effective shared governance were present on campus. The transitional governance structure put too much power in the hands of administrators, they argued. "Faculty no longer has an adequate decision making role in those academic matters for which it bears primary responsibility," the authors wrote.

The third question concerned whether clinical faculty should be included in shared governance in the first place. The question was not, as Palazzo argued, whether clinical faculty were adequately vested, according to the investigators. "The committee suggests that a more relevant question is whether the participation of the clinical faculty in governance would enrich academic decision making at RPI," they wrote. Citing the AAUP’s 2003 statement on "Contingent Appointments and the Academic Profession," the investigators argued that including such faculty can benefit decisions related to student learning and protect academic freedom.

In part, the investigators noted, the dispute at RPI is rooted in a fundamental disagreement over dialogue and decision-making in the academy. "The provost’s insinuation that faculty opposition was pernicious seems to indicate a basic misperception of the role of the various institutional components in a system of shared academic governance," they wrote, "where dissent is expected and agreement is reached through a process of negotiation."

Cary Nelson, national president of the AAUP, said the strong senate and shared governance system that were once in place at RPI produced in him "a great deal of respect -- even a touch of envy," because promotion and tenure decisions were vetted by a senate committee and grievances adjudicated by faculty appointed committees. "Faculty members at many campuses have nothing of comparable quality and professional rigor," he said. "All that was lost when the administration suddenly closed the senate. The before and after picture at RPI is telling."

A fourth attempt at a compromise is under way. Nancy Campbell of RPI said the Rensselaer chapter of the AAUP is "hopeful" that it will yield a constitution that will bring about a return of shared governance to the campus -- though she said committee members were hand-picked by deans and administrators. "We are only cautiously optimistic," she said in an e-mail. "We cannot be certain that the administration and Board of Trustees understand the gravity of the situation."

(Note: This article has been updated from an earlier version to correct an error.)

— Dan Berrett

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