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**Shared Governance Is a Myth**

*By John Lachs*

Where can we find human beings who don't think well of their own ideas and don't enjoy defining the circumstances of their employment? Certainly not in the academic world, where tenure and full professorship are attendant on fiercely defended favorite theories, and mastery of the classroom gives teachers a taste for controlling the institutions where they work.

Administrators appear to honor teachers' desire for influence by establishing faculty senates and placing interested faculty members on a host of committees. Young professionals embrace committee assignments eagerly, believing that it is their responsibility to contribute to the governance of their colleges and delighting in the power they think this confers on them. It takes years of rank and the bittersweet experience of extensive committee service to realize that faculty influence on the operation of the university is an illusion, and that shared governance is a myth.

Committees report to administrative officers who are at liberty to accept, reject, or substantially alter faculty recommendations. In many cases, deans or subdeans convey to the committees they sit on what outcomes the administration considers acceptable. This not only guides deliberations but also casts a pall of futility over contrary conceptions. Only rarely does a committee offer recommendations not in line with the prior ideas of top administrative officers.

One would think that faculty senates exercise jurisdiction over a range of college life and policy. In reality, the right of many senates does not extend beyond making recommendations to the president, who is under no obligation to accept them. The processes of guiding and tempering conversations that occur on committees are
even more visible in senates: Presidents or their representatives indicate what recommendations they wish to receive and, after a bit of thrashing about, the faculty members produce them.

When I served as chair of the Vanderbilt University Faculty Senate, the chancellor met once a month with the senate's executive committee. The meetings were cordial, but it was clear that the chancellor used them to inform the senate of what he wanted. When the committee challenged some of his ideas, he summarily terminated the meetings, sending his provost to tell us each month what the chancellor had done.

On another occasion, I was asked to chair a committee assigned to develop a student bill of rights. The committee worked hard and came up with what seemed to many faculty members a balanced and sensible list of student rights and responsibilities. We were thanked for our labors—and then the document disappeared down a rabbit hole. No action has ever been taken pursuant to its terms, freshmen are not informed of its existence, and a search of Vanderbilt's publications turns up no reference to it.

Realists may ask why faculty members should have any influence over the operation of educational institutions. Decision-making about the future of colleges and universities is vested in chancellors or presidents, who hire a circle of more or less professional managers. Regrettably, perhaps, no line of authority extends from governing boards to faculty members, conferring on them the right to define the nature—and chart the future—of their institutions. They have a limited right to determine what they teach in their classes, and they usually have the last word on the grades their students receive. Is that not enough authority for people who like to profess that there is an immoral element in all power?

This realist argument receives support from two additional considerations: Faculty members have no special competence in running organizations; many of them lack the practical sense required for making savvy and timely decisions concerning the complexities of institutional life. Moreover, they have little or no interest in the details of administration. They may want tenure, promotion, higher salaries, and convenient parking, but only so that they may attend to their research and teaching. In this view, faculty members are neither capable of nor interested in managing
the university.

If that is right, as many a president will affirm in a moment of candor, why create the make-work charade of faculty committees, faculty membership on search committees for administrators, and ineffectual faculty senates? Why not admit the reality that the sharp line between management and labor has found a home in the university, and that faculty members are nothing more than employees? That may not be a happy state of affairs, but it would be wholesome to admit it, ridding professors of at least some of their self-importance and thereby enabling them to form a more accurate picture of their station.

A cynical person may suppose that the charade is sustained in order to exhaust the faculty with meaningless tasks so they don't actually give trouble to management. That is the view adopted by disaffected faculty members who see administrators as the malevolent lords of the university or, less fancifully, as the oppressive enemy. A few deans and presidents may indeed be motivated by scheming ill will, but it is unlikely that the system of powerless committees was invented to keep faculty in subjection.

A more probable source of this way of doing business is the residue of an old ideal of the university. Such survivals of previous practices are not unusual in social life. Physicians, for example, experience a struggle between two competing understandings of their field: the prevalent view that treating patients is a business, and the residue of the old ideal that it is a calling. Ministers live the same ambiguity. Faculty committees constitute the respect that today's university pays to the old notion that it is a community of students and scholars. The impotence of the committees is acknowledgment that at this time in history, institutions of higher education are business ventures, in certain ways similar to factories.

There is a simple way to judge whether the old or the new idea of the university prevails in an institution. If education is primarily a business, managers hire the faculty. If universities are communities of students and scholars, faculty members hire the managers. The difference between the two strategies is immense, because it determines the locus of power. Looked at from this perspective, it is even clearer that in today's universities, faculty members are
employees with no say in the operation of their institutions.

The growing disempowerment of the faculty is accelerated by the distance of governing boards from campus processes. Board meetings are carefully choreographed events, designed by administrations to display their excellence. Many trustees believe that they occupy honorary positions and consider themselves unqualified or unprepared to ask hard questions of the managers they have hired. As a result, as long as administrators keep serious problems out of the public eye, they retain power over the faculty and enjoy considerable operational leeway.

Is this the way things ought to be? General Motors disintegrated before the very eyes of its Board of Directors. It may well be that unless governing boards make direct contact with the faculty, the meltdown of some institutions is just a matter of time.

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