

University Governance: Reflections of a G-6 Insider and a Modest Proposal for Change

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We are at an important crossroads in the history of governance at the university. As Faculty Senate President Leon Giles notes in his column, G-6 discussions between trustees and faculty have been wide-ranging and productive. All parties in the conversation brought good faith and a generosity of spirit to the table. The G-6 group established what is currently possible and impossible as concerns university governance, and came away feeling good about it.

As part of its proceedings G-6 trustees and faculty unpacked a lot of what differentiates us as carriers of “corporate” and “academic” culture. But removal of obstacles to better governance also demands take we take note of some of the similarities. Three years ago Richard Chait, a Professor of Higher Education at Harvard, articulated in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* some of the common features of trustee and faculty culture. These include (1) organizational conservatism (e.g., neither group has blazed a trail toward governance reform by radically redesigning committee structures, meeting formats, or decision-making procedures), (2) reciprocal resentment of unsolicited advice (e.g., each group freely comments on how the other should conduct business within its particular realm, with little concern for the problem of “tissue-rejection” when transferring ideas wholesale between cultures), and (3) tendencies to prescribe for the other what each is reluctant to enact for themselves (e.g., both groups recommend greater accountability, transparency, and innovation as general principles of ideal practice, while simultaneously safe-guarding a status quo that often runs on confidentiality, exclusivity, and utterly traditional ways of thinking and doing).

The G-6 group has made a good start toward establishing new trustee-faculty relationships that can mitigate some of the more debilitating cultural similarities, bridge the differences, and exploit shared commitments—chief among them a desire to see the university not only prosper but achieve world-class distinction. The upcoming Provost’s Conference will be crucial for bringing the rest of the campus community into the conversation in order to expand and deepen it. Faculty can and should have a crucial role in this conference activity. The key challenge, again as pointed out by Professor Giles, is to think about alternative ways that corporate and academic cultures can be brought together; that is, to imagine “hybrid” models of governance that are creatively and coherently integrative. Who better than faculty—with their cross-cultural and trans-historical perspectives on alternative organizational structures, the philosophies that underpin them, and the conditions that determine their relative success and failure—to provide grist for the mill?

Different governance issues—strategic planning, administrative searches, personnel evaluation, budgeting and fund-raising—will require different mechanisms and

processes. The conference will explore some of them. It seems to me that where academic mission is concerned—arguably the governance issue of greatest interest to faculty—we already have a good mechanism in place that can facilitate broad-based conversation and collaborative decision-making. This is the University Planning Advisory Council, or UPAC. UPAC established the existing University statements of Vision, Values, Mission, and Goals. It is a multi-constituent group that includes trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, and students. UPAC is interesting and important because it kept coming up in G-6 conversations as a touchstone for ideas about how trustees and faculty can better collaborate in building and implementing a shared vision. Yet today UPAC, like many other committees around campus, tends to suffer from the all-too-common malaise that comes with its members either knowing too much or too little about what's going on behind the scenes or in the interstices of the existing decision-making structure.

So, as one contribution toward imagining a more integrative governance model—and in the interest of floating a trial balloon for conference discussion—I suggest that we reinvent UPAC so that it becomes a more powerful and progressive engine of institutional evolution. We should downsize the Council without sacrificing the measure of representative participation that it already has. We should add more faculty who can better represent not particular units, but rather those transcendentally-important areas of academic life that know no particular boundaries in the organizational structure: sponsored research, interdisciplinary and cross-divisional teaching and learning, and public outreach and scholarship. We should add President Holtzman as a permanent UPAC member for insight on how he can support—for as broad a constituent base as possible—the academic initiatives developed and prioritized by the Council under the leadership of Provost Coombe. We should make UPAC and its deliberations better known to the campus community and regularly open it to constituents having something significant to say and/or recommend about the state and direction of the University. We should involve Chancellor Ritchie—early and often—in the meetings of a re-constituted and re-invigorated Council, something that would improve on past practice and help legitimize the proceedings. And, like G-6, we should encourage no-holds-barred discussions of how teaching, research, service, public scholarship, and the relationships between them can be strengthened so as to better establish the university's identity, enhance its reputation, and secure its future.