

Faculty Senate Organizational Meeting

April 29, 2008

Who Needs a Faculty Senate?

Does shared governance require a faculty senate? After three decades without a senate, Boston College faculty are champing at the bit for more influence over institutional decisions.

By Robin Matross Helms and Tanya Price

Faculty participation in campus governance is declining nationwide. As higher education shifts toward market models of organization, boards and administrators increasingly apply bureaucratic modes of decision making to areas that used to be the domain of faculty members. All too often, administrators seem to sidestep faculty senates in favor of “more efficient” and “accountable” decision making that does not reflect faculty opinion or expertise. To explore this issue at the local level, a faculty committee at our institution, Boston College, commissioned the School of Education to conduct a survey of shared governance. We participated in the survey and report its results in this article.

Boston College, which has more than 600 faculty members and 14,000 students, including 4,500 graduate students, is unusual among research universities. It has no formal arrangements for faculty participation in university decision making beyond that available within individual schools. Unlike most other research universities, it relies almost entirely on administrators for decision making at the institutional level.

Although BC may be unusual among its peers—in 2002, the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis at the University of Southern California reported that more than 90 percent of doctoral-granting institutions have a faculty governing body that participates in institutional governance—we believe that faculty responses to the Boston College survey point to the concerns and frustrations that might develop among faculty at other institutions as higher education increasingly adopts corporate-style management structures and forgoes shared decision making. On the other hand, the responses also suggest that the traditional senate model is not without its problems and sometimes may not actually be the most effective mechanism of shared governance.

Boston College was established in 1863 by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), an order of the Catholic church. For more than a century, the college successfully fulfilled its mission as an agent of social uplift for poor Irish and other Catholics who had limited opportunities to attend college. By the mid-1970s, however, BC's financial position had deteriorated to near bankruptcy. Efforts to improve the institution's finances led to changes in the university's governance structure, notably the disbanding of the faculty senate. By all accounts, the senate's disbanding was not a contentious move. Indeed, many faculty members supported it, partly because they regarded the senate as barely functioning.

Although the institution's fortunes improved considerably after the reforms of the 1970s, the faculty senate was not reinstated. Over the following decades, faculty increasingly expressed concern about

their lack of involvement in institutional decision making. Ultimately, in 2002, a faculty committee commissioned the survey of all full-time faculty whose results we report in this article. The survey instrument was based on one developed by the AAUP, but it was modified to fit BC's circumstances and the requirements of the commissioning committee.

Mixed Picture

The survey found that most professors at Boston College believe that faculty engagement in institutional governance is important: more than 90 percent of faculty respondents said they view participation in shared governance as a worthwhile faculty responsibility. In terms of their satisfaction with the current level of faculty involvement in governance, the results were mixed.

Faculty members reported being satisfied with their role in decision making at the departmental and school levels, agreeing that faculty committees represent their interests well and accomplish objectives such as developing educational policy; reviewing curricula; setting standards and procedures for evaluation of teaching and scholarly production and for retention, promotion, and tenure; and granting of tenure and promotion of faculty. Respondents were also positive about the effectiveness of faculty committees in governing themselves and communicating with university constituents. Most agreed that faculty have a say in setting the agendas, choosing representatives and leadership, and establishing procedures for the committees that oversee areas in which the faculty should have primacy.

In terms of institutional-level governance, the respondents were more negative. They reported little or no influence over institutional decision making in areas such as the university's budget or athletics. In addition, they noted few formal arrangements for communications between the faculty and the governing board and said faculty have little influence over the selection and evaluation of academic administrators. Almost two-thirds of the respondents said they do not believe that Boston College fosters shared governance by maintaining reasonable workloads and supporting and rewarding participation in governance work.

On the positive side, respondents said they believe that relationships between them, academic administrators, and the governing board are cooperative and open to communication. Similarly, most faculty members agreed that they can express dissenting views without reprisal. A small majority of the faculty agreed that the campus climate supports a diversity of opinions, schools of thought, perspectives, and personal styles.

Still, although respondents reported being satisfied with some aspects of institutional governance, most BC faculty are unhappy about their current role in the governance of the institution. They do see a solution, however: 81 percent say they favor the establishment of a faculty senate.

Influential or Ceremonial?

In expressing their desire for a senate, faculty respondents made it clear that they want any senate that is

established to be “effective” and not “look good but be a waste of everyone’s time.” The BC faculty is thus looking for the type of senate that higher education scholar James T. Minor has termed “influential” rather than “ceremonial.” Influential senates aim to bring about productive changes throughout the institution, not simply in areas that are strictly academic. Ceremonial senates are more symbolic than effective and are typically unable to enact real change within an institution.

Unfortunately, achieving an influential senate is no easy task. In a 2004 article titled “Understanding Faculty Senates: Moving from Mystery to Models,” published in the *Review of Higher Education*, Minor notes that “faculty senates are often viewed as dysfunctional, underperforming, or impeding.” Senates that are influential, he writes, almost always have a trusting, collaborative relationship with administrators. Senates become ceremonial when presidential and administrative authority dominates and communication between faculty and administrators is minimal. Because BC has such a strong tradition of top-down, centralized governance, any senate that is established might well end up being ceremonial. If this were to happen, faculty discontent could potentially increase.

Ceremonial senates might not be all bad, however. In a 1991 article, “The Latent Organizational Functions of the Academic Senate: Why Senates Do Not Work but Will Not Go Away,” published in *New Directions for Higher Education*, higher education scholar Robert Birnbaum wrote about the important, if unintended, role of faculty senates in meeting more than the apparent or manifest needs of faculty and institutions. By providing opportunities for socialization, congregation, discussion, professional screening, and the like, senates can contribute to institutional stability in the potentially contentious, volatile environment of higher education. So even if a senate at BC turns out to be mostly ceremonial, it might meet the needs of some faculty members and the institution generally.

A faculty senate might also increase the perceived prestige of the institution and help to attract high-caliber faculty. Senates, effective or not, are prominent features of elite institutions. They signify a commitment to academic standards. BC is now developing a five-year strategic plan and considering how it might further raise its standing in different communities. As BC moves to re-engineer its image, it may want to ensure that all of the standard indicators of academic quality are in place. Introducing a senate would be a low-risk activity that might help recruit academic highfliers—even if they are unlikely to attend senate meetings.

Institutional Response

In response to data from our survey and other information, BC’s administration has tentatively agreed to establish a faculty senate. Despite the possibility that a senate will be, initially at least, largely ceremonial, we believe that BC should move forward with a senate.

After twenty years of financial reform and efforts to elevate prestige among its peer institutions, BC has reached a position that permits the administration to relax a little, ease up on the reins of power, and engage more constituents in governance. A faculty senate will create a forum for interschool discussion and collaboration to complement the faculty involvement now occurring at the department and school

levels. Although faculty members are not clamoring for more administrative work, many of them clearly want the opportunity for systematic cross-school collaboration.

As this article goes to press, the structure of BC's future senate—including the degree to which it will have decision-making powers—has yet to be determined. We expect that, in the short term, the senate's establishment will contribute to a greater sense of validation and recognition within the faculty. In the longer term, however, the senate's effectiveness will be determined by the degree to which administrators—and fellow faculty—actually use the senate in governance.

The challenge will be to develop trust and respect between members of the faculty senate and administrators, especially senior administrators. If BC is genuinely committed to shared governance, the senate may become an influential force on campus, able to contribute to the institution's educational mission as well as its market aspirations.

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<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2005/ND/Feat/matr.htm?PF=1>

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Parliamentary Overview for the ECU Faculty Senate

The Faculty Senate of East Carolina University follows Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised, currently using the 10th edition, published by Perseus Publishing (ISBN #0-7382-0384-X). The 704-page text is available for purchase through bookstores, but many websites contain summaries of the most common procedures and practices of these parliamentary rules.

Why use a set of rules in the Faculty Senate?

Robert's Rules provides organizations like the Faculty Senate a set of rules for conduct at meetings, all in an effort to allow everyone to be heard and to make decisions without confusion.

What else governs the meetings of the Faculty Senate?

Appendix A of the ECU Faculty Manual contains the Faculty Constitution and By-Laws of our Faculty Senate. These documents describe the organization of the senate, elections, and the order of agenda. When there is no specified "rule" within these documents, Robert's Rules prevail.

What should senators do to prepare for the Faculty Senate meetings?

Each senator and alternate will receive a notice that the Faculty Senate agenda is available via e-mail and on the Faculty Senate website. Senators need to print the entire agenda, all attachments, and then review the documents to familiarize themselves with the content and issues before each meeting. Talking to other faculty members in a unit is a good way to find out the ideas on key issues that are relative to each unit.

Do senators have to stand up if they want to speak?

The Chair of the Faculty will recognize all speakers and will call them by name (be sure your name is clearly displayed in front of you at the table). It is especially helpful for senators who wish to speak during a senate meeting to stand, state their name, state their academic unit, and then make their point. The Secretary records these comments in the minutes of the meeting. It is important that persons are credited with their own comments if those ideas are included in the meeting minutes.

What do senators call each other during senate meetings?

The generic term "professor" is usually used as a title for all senators. For administrators with titles, it is appropriate to use that title. The Chair of the Faculty is usually addressed as Mr./Ms. Chair or Mr./Ms. Chairperson.

What do I need to know about parliamentary procedure if I'm serving as a faculty senator?

There are some basic points of parliamentary procedure that are most critical: making a motion, waiting for a motion to be seconded, debating a motion, and voting on the motion. A good review of these basic motions is available on the following website:

<http://cyberbuzz.gatech.edu/apo/robert.html>. The following websites offer summaries and overviews of parliamentary procedures and may be helpful tools. The deciding factor, though, are the strictest interpretations of the stated Robert's Rules. It is the responsibility of the Parliamentarian to make those interpretations and to advise the Chair during the actual meetings.

<http://www.robertsrules.com/course.html>

<http://www.robertsrules.org>
<http://www.taa-madison.org/q+d-rules.html>
http://www.arga.org/mr_robrt.htm

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