Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: Alvernia University
Background

Higher education institutions with a religious affiliation and a sponsoring congregation often have a two-tiered governance structure comprised of the normal governing board and a group of representatives of the religious sponsors who have specified "reserved powers" intended to help ensure the religious identity of the institution. This arrangement can be complex and often puzzling—even to those who function within it. Further, in the contemporary context, this structure has the potential to be both cumbersome and somewhat precarious in terms of its longer-term viability. While important to the institution’s religious identity, the additional level of review and approval required can be an impediment to an institution’s capacity for responsive and agile decision making in a highly volatile environment for higher education. At the same time, in some cases the declining membership of the sponsoring order requires a reexamination of both formal and informal mechanisms as the institution looks toward the future.

The initiatives undertaken by Alvernia University to address these issues enabled the University to reconfigure parts of the governance model while at the same time strengthening and highlighting its commitment to its Franciscan heritage and to its sponsoring congregation, the Bernadine Franciscan Sisters. It did so in a process that engaged a broad range of campus stakeholders as well as congregational leaders.¹

Actions Taken

In 2007, new vision and mission statements were drafted to frame the development of the university’s strategic plan. These statements emphasize the university’s aspiration to be "a distinctive Franciscan university" rooted in the Catholic and liberal-arts traditions, as well as reaffirming the commitment to the University’s core values and St. Bonaventure’s notion of "knowledge joined with love." The first priority of the strategic plan itself (the plan comprised five priorities and thirteen goals) focused specifically on becoming "a mission-centered university with a far stronger commitment to Franciscan identity."²

The next step in the process was the creation of the “Franciscan Learning Community” that included faculty, staff, students, and congregational members, charged with engaging in a two-year "process of discernment, planning and action about mission and identity" that would lead to "the design of a robust program of mission education for the University community."³ The Franciscan Learning Community’s work served some critically important purposes: it “became a ‘seed group’ for expanding institutional understanding of the university’s identify and mission,” ⁴ reaffirmed a shared understanding of the university’s identity and values, proposed an action plan addressing “the need for greater intentionality regarding mission,” ⁵ and recognized the critical importance of including lay women and men from all faith backgrounds in "ensuring a strong commitment to mission."⁶

¹ This case statement draws heavily from a document drafted by President Thomas Flynn and Assistant to the President for Mission and Education Sister Roberta McKelvie (“Sponsorship Covenants and Mission Officers: A Case in Point”), as well as from conversations with the principals involved.
³ Ibid., 3.
⁴ Ibid., 3.
⁵ Ibid., 3.
⁶ Ibid., 3.
At the same time as the Franciscan Learning Community was doing its work, Alvernia’s board of trustees engaged in a series of plenary sessions that explored the University’s Catholic and Franciscan identity. One of the significant issues to arise from these sessions was the recognition that the complexity of the two-tier governance model, the demographic challenges as the population of the sponsoring congregation dwindled, and the Vatican II mandate for lay-religious collaboration all pointed to the need for a thorough and thoughtful institutional response to these issues.

As a result, in July 2010, the University established a Sponsorship Learning Community (SLC), comprising five members of the congregation’s leadership and five lay trustees, convened by the president of St. Bonaventure University (and member of Alvernia’s board), Sister Margaret Carney.

At the end of a full year of bi-monthly meetings that were, in essence, a study group focused on the full understanding of the concepts and practices of sponsorship, the Sponsorship Learning Community identified the following tasks as their agenda for the following year:

- Continue to build collegial relationships among new congregational leaders [due to be selected that summer – DEM], the board, and the president
- Begin the groundwork for development of a “sponsorship agreement” and a review of the university’s bylaws
- The development of a “sponsorship covenant”

Led by Sister Roberta McKelvie, formerly part of the Congregational leadership team and newly appointed as special assistant to the president for mission integration and education, a core working group of the SLC that included the congregational minister, the chair of Alvernia’s board of trustees, the university’s president, and the convener of the SLC, set to work on the creation of the Sponsorship Covenant.

It goes without saying an inquiry into the relationships—both formal and informal—between the university and the congregation had to carefully and thoughtfully negotiate some delicate issues. Board members needed to be reassured that the congregation continued to have the willingness and capacity to be effective sponsors. The congregation was anxious lest their important role be unduly weakened. The fact that the board of trustees was legally the corporate entity of Alvernia, but that the congregation appeared to have significant influence, even control, had raised concerns—particularly among faculty—in the years prior to President Flynn’s arrival. The university’s longstanding bylaws accorded reserved powers to the congregation that could create uncertainty on the part of the university and its board—including the power to “adopt, amend, repeal or alter the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws” and to “merge, consolidate, dissolve, or effect any fundamental corporate reorganization of the University Corporation,” and to fire the president without the approval of the board. And there were some areas of board decision making that required ratification of the congregation—a replication of effort that, in the contemporary context, was perhaps unnecessarily cumbersome.

---

7 Ibid., 4-5.
8 Article III, 2, (b) (d)
Outcomes

The working group created a Sponsorship Covenant that is a powerful and compelling commitment to the bond between the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters (the congregation) and the university. The Covenant states that “The Congregation and the University... desire to make a formal statement of mutual support, engagement and accountability... to nurture and sustain this most important relationship, building on the warm, positive and collaborative relationship between the Sisters and the University.”9 It explicitly states that it is “a voluntary commitment to share moral and spiritual obligations and is not intended to create new legal rights or abrogate civil or canonical legal processes. [emphasis mine—DEM]”10 In its “shared principles,” the Covenant emphasizes the vital importance of open communication, mutual trust, responsibility and accountability, and of respectful deliberation,11 terms that we have heard throughout the AGB project as essential not only to the effectiveness of shared governance, but to an institution’s very health and vitality. Alvernia’s board of trustees enthusiastically approved the Covenant in December 2012.

The same core working group then reviewed the university’s bylaws in the context of their previous discussions and the Sponsorship Covenant. The reserved powers accorded the congregation were revised and updated to reflect current best practice in boards’ exercise of their fiduciary responsibilities, including the hiring of the president.

Beyond these vitally important concrete outcomes, there were other consequences to these processes that are greatly valued by the university’s stakeholders and the congregation. Not surprisingly, the work of the two Learning Communities led to a significant increase in mutual understanding, respect and support between the university administration and board on the one hand, and the congregation on the other. Particularly with the increase of lay members on the board, it is essential that all members of this multi-tiered governance structure have a clear understanding and appreciation of the history, values, and perspectives that each of the parties bring to the table as the university considers the decisions that will shape its future.

In this regard, it is of particular note that the two working groups were labeled “learning communities,” not “task forces” or “ad hoc committees.” This distinction in nomenclature is not trivial—it emphasizes that the task of the two groups was to educate themselves—and the community—on the broad range of issues that would shape the university’s actions in the future. And it emphasizes the relational dimension of this undertaking, a fundamental value of the Franciscan tradition.

The ongoing conversations about institutional governance have been complemented by a focus on the faculty roles in governance and institutional decision making. The university’s strategic planning process has been chaired by a faculty member, and there are faculty serving on ad hoc task forces of the board and as representatives to board committees. At the same time, there are concerns on the part of faculty members about the workload involved in both faculty self-governance and faculty participation in institutional governance, and the current faculty council chair is leading an effort to rethink the faculty’s committee structure. Both the president and the board chair expressed concerns about the lack of

---

9 “Sponsorship Covenant: Alvernia University and the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters,” p. 1, quoted with permission of the University
10 Ibid., 2.
11 Ibid., 2.
continuity and succession planning in faculty leadership (a phenomenon experienced by virtually all colleges and universities).

Additionally, both the president and the faculty leadership have been focusing on issues of communications as foundational to effective campus participation in governance. The university’s self-study for its recent reaccreditation by the Middle State Commission pointed to communications challenges that have arisen to a great extent because of the increasing complexity of the institution. The faculty chair has been conducting a “listening tour” on communications throughout this academic year, and the president is hosting a series of conversations, including dinners at the president’s home, that include faculty member and board members, students, senior administrators, and congregational leaders.

While “still a work in progress” according to the president and the chairs of the faculty council and the board, the institution is making progress in strengthening faculty participation in governance at all levels, and in shifting the discourse regarding governance from one of “authority” to a focus on engagement, shared responsibility, and accountability—an important transition that we have seen taking place on campuses across the country.

Lessons Learned

- Institutional change is always complex and complicated—all more so in the multi-tiered governance structure of institutions sponsored by religious orders; open communication and mutual respect, plus a healthy regard for the institution’s history, traditions, mission, and core values are essential to a successful outcome
- As institutions become more complex, it is essential that board, president, and faculty leadership are attentive to the impact of change on policies, procedures, structures, and communications
- The very process of focusing on principles and policies of governance that engages all of the stakeholders strengthens the bonds among those parties in ways that have a lasting effect on the institution
- Effective shared governance requires an understanding of the disjunction in the parties’ respective engagement: the president lives governance every day; the faculty deal with governance episodically, and board members for the most part focus on it when the board meets (with the exception of the chair and the executive committee)
- Effective governance is not just structural—it is relational, and requires education, socialization, and interactions among the parties that are not solely task-oriented