Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: California State University
Background

Dr. Timothy P. White became chancellor of the California State University (CSU) system in December of 2012. The CSU system is the largest four-year system of higher education in the country, with twenty-three campuses, nearly half a million students, and forty-nine thousand faculty and staff. Leadership of such a large, complex, and geographically dispersed system is by definition a challenging task, but Dr. White assumed his position in a particularly difficult time for the system.

Prior to Dr. White's tenure, the system had endured nearly one billion dollars in state funding cuts, resulting in the elimination of positions, programs, and services, and the need to turn away tens of thousands of students eligible for admission. There were controversies surrounding pay increases for some campus presidents under Dr. White's predecessor at the same time as faculty and staff salaries stagnated. A significant increase in tuition (a consequence of the state funding cuts) led to a proliferation of student protests on campuses and at meetings of the board of trustees, and faculty voted to strike in rolling campus walkouts to protest the lack of salary increases. Further, there were pervasive and deep-seated concerns among faculty regarding the state of shared governance under the previous system chancellor, resulting in a number of resolutions by the Academic Senate of the California State University (ASCSU) "decrying the erosion of shared governance within the system."1

The appointment of Dr. White, who himself is a product of California's legendary Master Plan for Higher Education and who had been president of one of the University of California campuses, was welcomed by the system's stakeholders. In particular, faculty saw the change in leadership as an opportunity to reassert their role in shared governance as mandated by the "constitutional documents" at both the system and campus levels.

But Dr. White soon found himself embroiled in his own controversy related to shared governance. As the new system chancellor, he visited all twenty-three campuses several times, meeting with faculty leadership, staff, and students. At virtually every meeting, he was asked about his understanding of and commitment to shared governance. His response was, "I don't believe in shared governance; I believe in shared leadership."2 With this response, Dr. White was trying to convey several points: "governance" is a kind of "regulatory" term, and he wanted to emphasize that he wanted everyone to be engaged in the future of the system; "shared leadership" means collective accountability and bringing the very best minds together to focus on the major issues facing the system.3 He further noted in our conversation that, "Key for me is that if there is a lot of shared involvement in discussing, debating, and crafting, then there's a lot of ownership on the part of the stakeholders who have to get things done."4

Perhaps not surprisingly, particularly given the system-wide uneasiness related to governance and decision making that Dr. White inherited, this seemingly simple change in terminology caused great anxiety—particularly among faculty—regarding his commitment to shared governance, in spite of his focus on inclusiveness and engagement. The impact of the change in vocabulary was exacerbated by the fact that Dr. White—in his discussions about governance and decision making—did not initially refer to the system's "canonical documents" that codify the respective roles of the parties to shared governance.

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1 "Reaffirming the Principle of Shared Governance Within the California State University," https://www.calstate.edu/acadsen/Records/Resolutions/2015-2016/documents/3236.shtml
2 Personal conversation with Dr. White, November 28, 2016.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
Actions Taken

In March 2016, the ASCSU passed a resolution outlining its concerns:

RESOLVED: That the Academic Senate of the California State University (ASCSU) reaffirm the principle of shared governance legislated in the Higher Education Employer-Employee Relations Act (HEERA) 3561 (b) as follows: "The Legislature, recognizes that joint decision making [sic] and consultation between administration and faculty or academic employees is the long-accepted manner of governing institutions of higher learning and is essential to the performance of the educational missions of these institutions...."; and be it further

RESOLVED: That the ASCSU request that the Chancellor clearly articulate, in the written response to this resolution, how the principle of "shared leadership" – to which he has often referred – either conforms with, or differs from, both the HEERA statute and the "long-accepted manner" of shared governance as defined in the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP's) "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities"; and be it further

RESOLVED: That the ASCSU express ongoing concern that, when faculty leaders from CSU campuses have called upon the Chancellor to intervene when serious violations of shared governance on their respective campuses have been documented, the Chancellor's responses at times reference "shared leadership" yet fail to offer solutions that are responsive to the requests;⁵

In addition to several specific issues that the ASCSU identified as exemplifying the difference between the principles of shared governance and the chancellor's concept of shared leadership, it was clear that the language itself continued to be an issue:

In contrast to the universally accepted principle of shared governance, "shared leadership" itself is a concept not native to academe but rather to business settings wherein the lexicon and practice of "team-building" is more normative than is the practice of governance.⁶

In April 2016, the State University dean responded to these resolutions on behalf of the chancellor in a letter addressed to the then-chair of the ASCSU. While acknowledging the importance of existing governance structures, the response both further explicates the notion of "shared leadership" and points to the fact that formal shared governance structures are not always adequate to the task of meeting the system's challenges:

Since coming to the CSU, Chancellor White has consistently highlighted the idea of shared leadership as a way of "sharing in the leadership of this university, ensuring that we are consistently learning from each other, and evaluating our failures and successes..." *Shared leadership builds on collegial relationships and is compatible with our understanding of the tradition of shared governance in higher education.* [emphasis added] Further, it is a way to conceptualize our work together and *takes place within existing governance structures, including the Academic Senate of the California State University.* [emphasis added] The CSU Academic

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⁵ https://www.calstate.edu/acadsen/Records/Resolutions/20152016/documents/3236.shtml

⁶ Ibid.
Senate and administration share a common mission on behalf of the CSU and the people of California and we look forward to our working together to shape the future.

Many issues may arise on campuses, and most are resolved through the processes of shared governance at the campus level. There are times when we are confronted with more difficult issues, and each of these has its own history and complexity. By their nature they do not lend themselves to a single approach or solution. Responsible governance requires that we look at each case and its distinguishing characteristics, and our response must take those characteristics into account. In all cases we believe collegiality, consultation, and trust are essential elements in building and maintaining the relationships necessary for shared governance within the university, and the Chancellor offers advice in varying and nuanced ways with an eye to enabling solutions to be crafted on campus as they maximize ownership and success of the path forward.7

Subsequently, in May 2016, Dr. White met with the ASCSU for a lengthy discussion about the concepts of shared governance, shared leadership, and the Senate's concerns about the operationalization of those concepts in practice.

Outcomes

There have been some concrete outcomes that have earned the praise of faculty and board leadership alike, and that reflect Dr. White’s emphasis on engaging a broad spectrum of the “right” voices in addressing the system’s issues. In particular, several task forces have been established to make recommendations on some important areas of concern—task forces that reflect the chancellor’s desire to “bring the very best minds together to focus on the major issues facing the system.”8

One of the dominant issues in the higher education discourse in recent years has been a focus on the importance of quantitative reasoning as a critical student learning outcome. In the 2015-2016 academic year, the ASCSU convened a Qualitative Reasoning Task Force to “review the CSU’s expectations for student proficiency in qualitative reasoning, both before college and at graduation, and to recommend changes to existing policies and practices.”9 The membership of the task force, mandated by an ASCSU resolution in September 2015, included a broad range of faculty members from a variety of disciplines, system and campus administrators, public officials (including the lieutenant governor), public school specialists, and representatives from the corporate sector. The task force also brought in highly-respected specialists from around the country to inform their deliberations. It is important to note, however, that those charged with writing the actual report (i.e., the “drafting members”) were faculty members, preserving the important role of faculty in curricular matters.

The Task Force Report contained for sets of recommendations that would substantially change the system’s approach to quantitative reasoning:

Recommendation I: Formulate an updated quantitative reasoning definition based on CSU best practices and reflecting national standards.

8 see footnote 3 above
Recommendation II: Revise CSU quantitative reasoning requirements and adopt equitable, feasible requirements that articulate with the other segments.

Recommendation III: Ensure equitable access and opportunity to all CSU students.

Recommendation IV: Create a CSU “Center for Advancement of Instruction in Quantitative Reasoning.”

In November, 2016 the recommendations were approved by the ASCSU without dissent. At that same meeting, the ASCSU approved a resolution establishing an ASCSU Task Force to Study General Education, and the chancellor has created a task force to look at the system’s tenure density and its impact on governance. The latter task force includes three ASCSU senators, three representatives of the faculty union (who are not normally involved in governance issues), a campus president, a provost, and representatives from the human resource divisions. Complementing that effort have been two conferences of contingent faculty sponsored by the California Faculty Association (the union) looking at ways for those faculty to become more involved in shared governance.

Additional task forces have focused on student achievement and on a sustainable financial future for the CSU system—both with broad-based membership and frequent conversations with constituencies as their work progressed.

Given the complexity of the system, a history of distrust and conflict that predates Dr. White’s tenure, and the obvious impossibility of a faculty/staff population of 49,000 reaching consensus on any issue, the relationship between the system chancellor and the faculty will always be a work in progress and one that requires constant attention and commitment on the part of all parties. But it is clear that efforts on the part of both the chancellor and the ASCSU have led to greater mutual understanding, ongoing communications and trust. Further, the task force model—again, reflecting the chancellor’s commitment to broaden the engagement on issues of importance—appears to be a productive model, both substantively in terms of what has been accomplished and symbolically in its commitment to shared governance, engagement, and accountability.

Lessons Learned

• Words matter—fidelity to language codified in foundational documents maintains the stability of working relationships among the stakeholders
• Standing matters—some entities are better than others at being inclusive, and ensuring that all constituencies have a voice in the discourse and that they can select their own representatives is vital to the health of shared governance
• Interaction matters—it is important to create opportunities outside the confines of formal meetings for meaningful engagement that promotes a culture of inclusion for all points of view
• Participants in shared governance need to check their egos at the door; effective governance requires the honest flow of ideas and the ability to listen to the voices of others

10 Ibid., 2-3.
• Relationships trump structure—it is much easier to deal with challenging issues and areas of disagreement when the parties involved have relationships of mutual respect and trust