Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: Rollins College
Background

In 2013, a vote of no confidence in the then-president was the result of a series of decisions made by the president and approved by the board of Rollins College, chief among them the top-down creation of a College of Professional Studies, without following the established faculty governance procedure. A year later, the president had retired and an acting president, the former dean of the graduate business school, had been appointed for a one-year term during the period of the search process for a new president. In addition, faculty governance was splintered and dysfunctional. A two-part governance system was split into three parts—one for the traditional arts and science faculty, one for the graduate school of business, and one for the newly created professional studies faculty. Each had its own bylaws and committee structure. In addition, the undergraduate business program had split in two, with one group of faculty staying with the arts and sciences and another group moving to the new college.

According to Dexter Boniface, current president of the faculty and a 13-year veteran at Rollins, while the creation of the new college was the lightning rod for the vote of no confidence and the related turmoil, faculty governance had not been working well at the institution for many years. There was tension between older and newer faculty, and between those with tenure and those on the tenure-track. Over time, these tensions spilled over into tensions between the president and the faculty. However, this dramatic departure from the usual shared governance decision-making process was at the heart of the major rupture among faculty, board and president. At the same time, the disruption in faculty self-governance caused by the creation of a separate faculty governance structure for the new College of Professional Studies resulted in what one administrator called “a whole system failure.”

The chair of the board at the time, David Lord, organized a series of small group meetings for trustees with faculty, staff, and students which resulted in several realizations: the board had allowed itself to be separated from the faculty, with deleterious results; the faculty had governance issues of its own to work through; before a presidential search process was launched, governance had to be addressed to help ensure a successful beginning for a new president; and, the interim president could play a significant role both in repairing the relationships among faculty, and in making progress on key governance issues.

Actions Taken

Over the next two years, two important periods of action followed, one led by the acting president, Craig McAllaster, and the next led by the new president, Grant Cornwell. The combined result was a strengthened structure for faculty governance and enhanced shared governance for Rollins.

McAllaster’s charge as acting president included rebuilding trust between the faculty and the administration, and straightening out some of the knottiest of the governance problems. As a well-liked faculty member who had served a long tenure as a dean of the Crummer Graduate School of Business, he had a deep well of goodwill to draw on as he gathered faculty to talk through governance structures, policies, and practices. McAllaster was devoted to listening to faculty, being candid about the college’s problems as well as its needs, and being transparent about his goals. During his year’s service, in addition to improving communication and trust between faculty and administration, he helped the business faculty recombine into one department.

During McAllaster’s period of leadership, several local trustees also began to attack problems with shared governance. Led by Allan Keen, chair of the presidential search committee and current chair of the board,
Shared Governance Case Study: Rollins College

they met with small groups of faculty on Friday afternoons to listen to their concerns. By listening, they hoped to build understanding and trust, but they also learned some things. For instance, they learned that there were concerns about what the faculty believed to be the board’s “secret” plan for the college’s future—turning the liberal arts college into a business school. They also learned that the faculty believed there was a “secret” strategic plan to guide this change. The board had no such intention or plan, but the creation of the College of Professional Studies had fostered these assumptions. Being able to hear these concerns in person was an important first step toward building the understanding necessary to create a positive board–faculty relationship. In total, this group of trustees attended 22 faculty gatherings which ranged in size from 6 to 40 faculty.

The search for the new president of Rollins also occurred during this time. The search committee put together by trustee Allan Keen comprised 14 members, including four faculty members, one staff member, three students, and six trustees. As other institutions have reported, the process of defining the desired characteristics of a new president can be a very unifying experience. That was the case for Rollins, and it also provided an opportunity lay to rest the idea that the board wanted to convert the liberal arts college into a business school. (See a description of the process in a sidebar on “Shared Governance and a Presidential Search” in “The Pick and the Process: Leading a Presidential Search in the Digital Age” in Trusteeship, November/December 2015.) To a person, the members of the search committee found the process helpful in strengthening trust, respect, and communication across roles.

Grant Cornwell was selected unanimously to become president of Rollins in 2015, and he led the second important period of action in improving shared governance. Despite the prior year’s work directly targeting faculty self-governance and institutional shared governance, Cornwell found that even before taking office every conversation he had with faculty quickly shifted to the broken system of shared governance. He encountered a deep sense of disenfranchisement, frustration, and alienation among the faculty stemming from the lack of process and inclusivity in the creation of the College of Professional Studies. Further, because of the method by which this new college was created, it never had a chance of success: it lacked legitimacy. And so, while as a new president he didn’t want to revisit the past, he realized the faculty needed to.

For the college to move forward under the leadership of the new president, the governance issues needed to be resolved in his first year. Despite being told that such change would take much longer, Cornwell worked with faculty leaders to devise a plan that would result in a new governance structure by May 2016—in time for a faculty vote—that could be implemented at the start of the 2016-17 academic year.

Several key decisions helped move this work forward effectively. The acting president, Craig McAllaster, was asked to serve as the interim provost, continuing his important connection with the faculty. The president turned his new home into a gathering place for faculty who met to discuss shared governance and their ambitions for faculty governance at Rollins. Cornwell also used the three sets of faculty bylaws as the focus for their work, asking how the governance structure could be used to make necessary change. Finally, Cornwell told the faculty, “This has to be your process,” acknowledging that for any governance reform to work, it has to owned by those who will be affected by it.

The process had several phrases. First, the various stakeholders were convened. Drawing on the existing faculty governance structures, ten faculty were asked to take on the review process. This group comprised the elected presidents of the three faculty bodies—the Arts and Sciences, the Crummer Business School, and the newly created College of Professional Studies—as well as representatives from committees of the
various faculty bodies. The president and provost were also members of the group. This expanded governance body was known as the EC Plus. The larger tent ensured that all voices were heard.

Next, the EC Plus developed a set of operating principles and goals for governance reform, with a focus on respect, collegiality, and transparency. The group sought a governance system that would advance the college’s mission; be as simple, efficient, and transparent as possible; protect academic freedom and respect the authority of the disciplines while recognizing that all academic programs are accountable to the faculty as a whole; accord respect to all members of the faculty irrespective of rank or discipline; and, provide collegial means for airing differences and adjudicating conflicts.

The third phase of the process was devoted to research. Members of the EC Plus were assigned schools similar to Rollins in terms of size and structure, and they were tasked with developing a menu of options for organizing a faculty. After identifying six different models, the EC Plus engaged the entire faculty in review and discussion through faculty meetings and randomly assigned breakout groups. They followed with a survey to identify those models with greatest support, and they shared the results of the survey broadly.

The fourth phase of the process was consensus building. Based on the survey, the EC Plus created a concrete proposal for establishing divisions by academic disciplines. Faculty were put in discussion groups for deliberation, and feedback led to a refined proposal. In spring 2016, the group took the proposal to the faculty for a vote, hoping for 75 percent support. Instead the proposal passed with 95 percent support. At this point, they had successfully defined a new structure for faculty governance. The College of Professional Studies was no more.

There was one more necessary step—the creation of bylaws so that they could meet the goal of having operational faculty self-governance in the 2016-17 academic year. In a heroic effort, the EC Plus met in May 2016 for three 10-hour days to draft bylaws for their newly approved structure. The group studied the three sets of existing bylaws and developed a single set to guide the faculty in governing their new structure. Over the summer, they sent the draft bylaws out to the faculty for reading, reflection, and response. Using the feedback, the EC Plus revised the bylaws and had them ready for faculty vote at the first faculty meeting of the 2016-17 academic year. The new bylaws passed with a positive vote of over 90 percent, and then were approved unanimously by the board at its October 2016 meeting. The faculty has committed to working with its new governance structure for three years, and then assessing how well it serves them.

Outcomes

Three important outcomes resulted from this two-year process. First, the faculty have a new governance structure and governance documents that guide their work and help them achieve the goals they set for themselves: faculty governance is collegial, transparent, and respectful. The faculty bylaws are aligned with the board bylaws and in keeping with the college’s charter.

Second, trust and communication between faculty and the board are improving, thanks in large part to the leadership of the previous and current board chairs, David Lord and Allan Keen, both of whom demonstrated tremendous skill and commitment to building open relations with the faculty, a requirement for creating a climate in which Rollins could reform its governance system. In addition, there is a new formal way for faculty and trustees to meet. President Cornwell created an *ad hoc* committee of
board members and faculty that meets without the president prior to each board meeting. The group meets without a formal agenda for unmediated dialogue on issues of mutual interest and concern. The trustees report back to the president on the general outlines of the conversation they have with the faculty, keeping him informed of areas of concern or interest, but not the specifics of individual comments. This *ad hoc* group is expected to be converted to a standing governance committee for both board and faculty.

Third, an environment of openness and respect has been created between the administration and the faculty, thanks in large measure to the work of President Cornwell and the EC Plus led by Professor Boniface. According to the president of the faculty, Cornwell was the key player in the governance initiative. Cornwell, in turn, praised the EC Plus for “brilliant governance,” and for being “honest brokers for the whole faculty,” and he praised Professor Boniface for his political savvy, open communication, and commitment to transparency.

**Lessons Learned**

- The system of shared governance needs good design and legitimacy of process. Without legitimacy, even the best design won’t work. The creation of a good system is based on an interactive, deliberation process that allows all voices to be heard
- Inclusiveness matters—it matters in faculty self-governance and it matters in shared governance
- Faculty are not “workers.” At their best, they feel ownership of their college and their place in it. If the system of shared governance is broken, that is profound for them. Healing takes time and attention
- Trustees should guard against becoming isolated from the faculty. Board members and faculty need as much interaction as possible around matters of substance to build trust and understanding
  - Trustees should get a regular briefing from the faculty about how governance is working and how board governance and faculty governance fit together, and when adjustments are needed, the board should support them
- Leadership matters. The improvement in shared governance at Rollins depended in large measure on commitment and strong leadership from administration, board, and faculty