Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: Stockton University
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Background

Since April 2015, Stockton University has been engaged in an ongoing, intensive discussion of institutional governance involving all of the university’s stakeholders. The immediate catalyst for this discussion was a crisis in early 2015 that not only deeply troubled trustees, faculty, administration, students, and staff, but that attracted constant negative attention by the media and pressure from the state’s political leadership.

In December 2014, the university had purchased a defunct casino in Atlantic City with the intention of turning it into a satellite campus. The university was in the process of changing its status from Stockton College to Stockton University and had grown from a single bucolic campus in the woods to a multi-campus institution, which raised questions about mission and the vision for the university’s future. There was considerable consternation, particularly among faculty and staff, regarding the lack of transparency and engagement in the process that led to the casino purchase. Not long after the acquisition, a subsequent decision was made to sell the property to a developer—a sale that was tied up in legal battles for months because of contradictory covenants regarding use of the building.

In April 2015, as the crisis threatened to overwhelm the university, the then-president went on leave and was replaced by the provost, Harvey Kesselman, first as acting and then as interim president. Dr. Kesselman was subsequently asked by the board the following fall to become the fifth president of Stockton University.

The campus turmoil regarding the casino purchase and subsequent sale surfaced a number of long-standing—but previously unarticulated—concerns, particularly among faculty and staff, regarding the leadership of the university and the lack of stakeholder engagement in decisions affecting the university’s future. All those interviewed agreed that governance was an issue that needed to be addressed urgently and rigorously at Stockton. Previous administrations operated in a “top-down” mode that included only faculty “favorites” in critical discussions, and many important decisions were made without the involvement of key stakeholders; the board of trustees’ commitment to shared governance, although sincere, was not fully manifested in practice; the board had assumptions about how decisions were made on campus that were not accurate; and, staff felt disrespected by faculty and left out of discussions on critical issues.

Actions Taken

Dr. Kesselman’s first move as acting president was to create three committees: a task force to identify an interim president; a task force to focus on initiatives in Atlantic City; and, a task force on shared governance. Each committee comprised trustees, members of the administration, faculty, staff, and students. Senior administrators, including the president, attend meetings of the task forces as often as possible, and their presence was (and is) clearly welcomed and encouraged by task force members.

The faculty members on the task force were ultimately appointed at the discretion of the president (the faculty senate made recommendations), which for some invoked memories of previous leadership styles. A member of the staff—a Stockton alumna herself—contacted the then-new provost, and was immediately appointed to the task force, a decision that was a powerful and welcome signal to the campus that things were changing. The task force had several clearly articulated goals:
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- To develop the definition of shared governance at Stockton, identify best practices in institutional governance and bring Stockton into compliance with those practices
- To assess the state of shared governance at Stockton, develop ways in which to get all members of the Stockton community reconnected to the future of the university, and identify mechanisms by which the voices of all stakeholders were heard in deliberations affecting the institution’s future
- To evaluate the relevance and appropriateness of the university’s mission and vision in the context of its changing circumstances

In its early meetings, the task force undertook a variety of initiatives, including:

- A literature review of shared governance best practices
- A review of Stockton’s founding documents
- Online surveys of faculty and staff
- Listening sessions with faculty, staff, students, and trustees

The surveys revealed some serious issues on campus. Staff felt that their voices were not heard and respected, particularly by the faculty. They trusted the board of trustees and the new administrative leadership, but felt that the faculty did not value them, and that faculty were not committed to transparency in their decision making. At the same time, the faculty survey showed that faculty believed that they did have a good relationship with staff, but that Stockton did not enjoy a high degree of transparency on the part of the senior administration.

Rather than fracture the campus further, the information derived from the surveys was actually a productive catalyst in focusing the inclusive campus conversations that were started almost immediately, and that continue to this day on a regular basis.

In the first year, the campus conversations focused on shared governance—what it is and how it is defined at Stockton. Those discussions, in addition to leading to the creation of a draft document on governance by the task force, have had a powerful impact in creating a campus culture of transparency, engagement and trust. This year, the ongoing campus conversations have focused on mission, vision, and values. In all of these discussions, there has been an intentional emphasis on valuing input from all members of the campus community.

Outcomes

There have been a number of powerful, positive outcomes to date. As noted above, the Shared Governance Task Force later this spring will continue to work on a formal document on governance at Stockton University (a draft is currently under review). But the very fact of the ongoing campus conversations themselves, with their emphasis on transparency, inclusion, and respect for all voices, has had a significant positive impact on morale and—more substantively—on stakeholders’ engagement in the important decisions that need to be made. The pervasive sense of crisis and uncertainty has subsided, and has been replaced by a collective focus on the university’s aspirations for the future and on the path to realizing those aspirations. It was emphasized while “all is not yet perfect,” there is confidence that the shared commitment at all levels to open, engaged and collaborative decision making will ensure continuous improvement in governance. In addition, it is clear that the active engagement of the senior administrative team and board leadership has been essential to the success of the processes thus far.
Lessons Learned

- An institutional crisis exposes flaws in institutional governance and culture, and a crisis is not a good time to address those flaws in a thoughtful and productive manner.
- Board members need to ensure that they have all of the relevant facts necessary to hold the administration accountable for actions and decisions; assumptions are not sufficient.
- Shared governance is a dynamic process that requires ongoing attention; it should be a regular topic of review and discussion to ensure that an institution’s practices are current, effective, and reflective of the institution’s values and aspirations.
- It is vital to take into account the voices and views of all campus stakeholders, including those who are not identified in formal governance documents.
- Leadership matters—the president’s commitment to transparency, communication, and collaboration is essential to a healthy governance culture.
- At the same time, all members of the campus community should recognize that any one of them is capable of catalyzing important conversations and productive change.
- Bringing all of the institution’s stakeholders—board members, administration and staff, faculty, and students—together on a regular basis maximizes the chances that they understand and appreciate each other’s roles and perspectives.
- It is important to recognize—and accept—that shared governance is a messy process: there are many voices clamoring to be heard, and their views are frequently divergent; there is often the need to balance the importance of timely decision making with the equal importance of the thoughtfulness and reflection of the academy; shared and inclusive governance is not governance by consensus—there will always be people unhappy with a decision, but it is important that their voices are heard before the decision is made.