Shared Governance: Changing with the Times

Case Study: Taylor University
Background

Taylor University is a relatively small (approximately 1,890 students), non-denominational faith-based institution in Upland, Indiana. The university is distinctive for—among other things—its “Life Together Covenant,” which “identifies the expectations for living in community as we seek to fulfill our mission.” All members of the Taylor community—staff, students, and faculty—are expected to commit themselves to the articles of the Covenant. Of particular relevance to the ongoing work on shared governance that began in 2014 is the portion of the Covenant dedicated to “Responsibilities for Community.” These include:

- **Building up One Another**: We expect each member of the community to strive consciously to maintain relationships that support, encourage, and build up one another.
- **Making Allowance for One Another**: Because of our fallenness, difficulties in relationships do occur. In such cases, we are to respond with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, making allowance for each other and forgiving one another.
- **Respecting One Another**: ... [any] kind of demeaning gesture, symbol, communication, threat, or act of violence directed toward another person will not be tolerated.
- **Speaking the Truth in Love**: A community such as ours can be strengthened by speaking the truth to each other with love. Problems in relationships and behavior can be resolved constructively by confronting one another in an appropriate spirit.
- **Reconciliation, Restoration, and Restitution**: Healing broken relationships is necessary for a healthy community. When relationships have been harmed, regardless of the reason, individuals are expected to reach out to one another, forgive one another, restore relationships, and make restitution.

It is within the context of these clearly articulated commitments that Taylor experienced some challenges in shared governance, beginning in 2014. According to Taylor’s current president, Lowell Haines (a Taylor alumnus who assumed office in June 2016 after 13 years on Taylor’s board and who had a distinguished career as an attorney specializing in higher education and nonprofit institutions), during the term of his successful and well-respected predecessor, the faculty had become rather passive regarding their governance roles. As a result, the former president had a history of “filling the void” in decision making, albeit “with the best of intentions.”

In 2014, the university began to experience some significant financial challenges. The administration’s response to these challenges was multifaceted, and included: 1) a limit on faculty/staff salary increases; 2) the initiation of the University Program Review (UPR), which focused on cost effectiveness and reduction and on opportunities for increased revenue. While the administration’s response was necessary and appropriate, and a faculty task force was involved in the UPR, the UPR—as one might expect—created a significant amount of uncertainty and anxiety regarding the future of some of Taylor’s academic programs (and the faculty that provided them). Further, the salary decisions came as an unwelcome surprise to the

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1 http://www.taylor.edu/about/mission/life-together-covenant.shtml
2 Ibid.
3 Personal conversation, March 29, 2017
4 Ibid.
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faculty, who had not been involved in discussions that led up to them. As the current board chair noted, "There was a lot of unrest and unhappiness on campus," and the board was "rather shaken that the faculty reacted so negatively"—the latter an indication of a larger communications issue at the university.

Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) surveys administered between 2011 and 2014 showed that: faculty did not feel sufficiently involved in campus decision making; they thought that the administration was listening to them less than previously; and, the administration was not sufficiently open with information. According to the current faculty moderator, "A lot of faculty and administrators had the sense that shared governance was getting a little rusty, and when these things happened, they focused attention on the problem." A small group of faculty was asked by the then-faculty moderator to draft a resolution for faculty approval, saying—in essence—that there was a general problem of shared governance at Taylor that warranted attention. A document was drafted in collaboration with the provost which, with the blessing of the trustees, led to the development of the Shared Governance Action Project (SGAP) in 2015.

Actions Taken

The SGAP working group has been co-chaired by Dean Michael Hammond and current faculty moderator, Prof. Matt DeLong. Other members of the ten-person working group include a member of the board of trustees, faculty members, and student development professionals—as Prof. DeLong noted, "We are trying to model shared governance as we look at shared governance." The working group meets at least monthly, looking broadly at the structure of shared governance and of faculty governance, at committee structures, and at faculty/administration and faculty/board relations.

The specific mandate of SGAP includes:

- Review of the current system and review of best practices in shared governance
- Proposals for revision of the system
- Revision of the faculty handbook
- The development of training modules in shared governance for new administrators, faculty, and board members
- The development of a mechanism for ongoing assessment of the state of shared governance at Taylor University

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5 Mark Taylor, personal conversation, March 17, 2017
6 In 2015, the HERI survey showed that faculty trusted and respected the senior administration at a higher level than the administration expected them to (i.e., from a comparison of faculty and administrators responses)
7 Matt DeLong, personal conversation, March 17, 2017
8 The SGAP initiative is also Taylor’s Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) for its Higher Learning Commission reaccreditation process
9 DeLong, March 17, 2017
As the group’s efforts have continued, there have been several discoveries, both negative and positive:

- The faculty’s committee system had “gotten out of control,” with faculty feeling overworked but under-supported
- The faculty officer system was not very strong
- The average faculty member had very little understanding of who board members are and what they do—and vice versa\(^{10}\)
- The board of trustees is very supportive and wants a greater understanding of faculty issues

Outcomes

While the SGAP initiative is still very much a work in progress (to be concluded in May 2017), with the formal and structural “deliverables” yet to be finalized, all three of those interviewed (the board chair, the president, and the faculty moderator) point to some substantive outcomes:

- As the board chair noted, the situation in 2014 was a “wake-up” call for the administration and the board that has led to some very positive consequences\(^{11}\)
- The engagement of faculty in both administrative and academic program review
- The inclusion of faculty members on the presidential search committee
- The development of a “Taylor University Decision Domain Matrix” and a “Taylor University Collaborative Decision Framework” (both currently in draft form); in the latter document the various types of institutional decisions are listed with indicators of who: offers recommendation(s); is consulted; makes the decision; approves the decision; provides parameters for the decision\(^{12}\)
- A greatly strengthened relationship of trust and openness among the faculty, board members, and the president
- Efforts to provide ongoing opportunities for board/faculty interaction

Not surprisingly, all three of those interviewed agreed that the process thus far at Taylor University has been much less contentious than one might expect (and that has been experienced on other campuses), thanks to the sense of a community of mutual trust provided by the articles of the Life Together Covenant. As has been the experience of many of the institutions profiled in these case studies, Taylor’s intensive and sustained attention to shared governance arose from a model that had slipped—relatively unnoticed—into dysfunction. Faculty, board, and president have embraced the challenge in a collaborative and collegial manner that—thus far—has not only produced positive results, but deeply reflects the university’s core values.

\(^{10}\) An issue prominent in AGB’s “listening sessions” that is noted in the recent publication, *Shared Governance: Changing with the Times*

\(^{11}\) Taylor, March 17, 2017

\(^{12}\) It is worth noting that President Haines emphasizes the need for the university to be flexible, agile, and responsive, and that the challenges the university faces require “more agile decision making”—a theme that permeated the discussions with president and board members that are reflected in *Shared Governance: Changing with the Times*
Lessons Learned

- None of the parties to shared governance should ever be surprised by one of the others—ongoing communication and transparency are critical to the health of shared governance
- Effective shared governance requires continual attention and review—and revision when appropriate
- “It is hard to fix the plane while it’s flying;” fixing shared governance in a manner that reflects the basic principles of shared governance can be a challenge, but it is essential
- Faculty and board members do not know enough about each other’s roles and culture, and solving that dilemma is the responsibility of all three parties to shared governance
- Differences in perspective and expertise among faculty, trustees and administration are to be expected—and indeed can be valuable—but they must be embedded in a foundation of mutual trust